



神様のメモ帳

杉井 光

イラスト*岸田メル

電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations



かみさま ちよう
神様のメモ帳5

ニート探偵アリスとその助手である僕は、深刻な事件の合間にも、ばかばかしくてつまらない、けれど忘れられない様め事にいくつも巻き込まれている。今回はそんな僕らの事件簿から、いくつかをご紹介しよう——

ミンさんを巡るストーカー事件「はなまるスープ顛末」、アリスご執心の酒屋を襲った営業妨害事件「探偵の愛した博士」、平坂組のバカども総勢を巻き込んだ誘拐事件「大バカ任侠入門編」に、特大100ページ書き下ろしのオールスター野球騒動「あの夏の21球」を収録。

泣き笑いの日常満載のニートティーン・ストーリー、待望の短編集が登場！



電撃文庫



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すぎ い ひかる
杉井 光

1978年、東京生まれ。池袋に引っ越してきてから、ずっと鶏ダシのラーメンばかりを作っていたが、ついに豚骨を売っている店を発見。異常な安さに恐れおののく。ついラーメン一杯の原価計算などしてしまう。友人の作家にもラーメン屋やれよって言われました。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女 卷ノ一～三

神様のメモ帳1～5

さよならピアノソナタ1～4

さよならピアノソナタ encore pieces



イラスト:岸田メル

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは <http://maigo.jp/>

カバー／加藤製版印刷



神様のメモ帳5

杉井光
イラスト*岸田メル

Character



ミンさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。



彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかずれてるところも。

平坂

Hirasaka-gumi

組

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。



四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の絆を交わしている。

電柱

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

アリス Alice

ス

ひきこもりの自称《ニート探偵》。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターベッパーから摂取している。



藤島 海

Narumi

鳴

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返し人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにごともやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、口ハ丁だけは一人前。

ニート探偵

NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず搜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。



テゾ先輩



ヒコさん



少佐

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す(ただし対女子限定)。

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物の工キスパート。



とあるゲーセンの興亡を賭けた真剣勝負。

あの の二十三球

夏 P253



Everyone, let's play with our chests raised. The uniform numbers that you are currently wearing are all the eternally saved numbers of the Kintetsu Buffaloes!
— Nashida Masataka

Prologue

What in the world does a so-called assistant detective do? People would ask me such a question occasionally. It really gives me a headache thinking of how to answer.

As a normal high schooler, although I head to the ramen shop and the detective agency in the same building, living a meaningless life by washing bowls, washing pajamas, buying Dr. Pepper, trying out new ramen, being brought to arcades, standing blankly, being dragged away to accompany gamblers, most probably, almost no one would believe it if I say that those are the jobs of an assistant detective.

The sole thing that I can say that it's my job as an assistant detective with my chest raised would probably be to create records of incidents.

"Oh, then hand it over for me to have a look." The detective said.

The detective who was my employer was called Alice, and was a girl about the age of a primary school student. Having lustrous, almost leg-length black hair coupled with bear-patterned pajamas, she has an appearance that people won't forget as long as they see it once.

"No, because that isn't something for people to look at."

"The sentence *not something for people to look at* is a shame on language, the greatest weapon of mankind! Listen well, Narumi. It's because there is a way of transmitting messages between people that we can continue to live on as humans. So let me have a look."

Just like her mystifying way of speaking, the detective was actually extremely obstinate.

"But..... I didn't even bring it here! It's just stored in my computer at home."

“Can’t you please say things like this earlier!”

Uh oh! Before I could stop her, Alice had long started to pound on the keyboard by her bed like a piano, opening a folder on the monitor. This little detective had first-rate cracking skills, so hacking into my computer was a piece of cake to her.

“W-What is this!”

After browsing through my work records, Alice jumped from the bed and turned around to glare at me.

“From your way of writing, doesn’t our agency look as though we were always cleaning up messes made by foolish people making stupid mistakes?”

“..... Isn’t that the main gist of it?”

“What in the world do you see the NEET Detective who speaks for the dead as!”

Alice was so annoyed that her long black hair was continually shaking, while her hands thumped the bed sheets non-stop.

“Haven’t we faced a few large cases where quite a few people were hurt or even died, and even you were left with wounds, being unable to move because of your used up energy? Why didn’t you record all that!”

“Because I don’t have the strength to do that at all!” And didn’t you say yourself that my energy was used up?

“In any case, I do not acknowledge these records. I shall rewrite this.”

While saying that, Alice started to add a few MBs of content and closely described her own room (especially the large crowd of dolls). I sighed, pulled the loudly protesting detective away from the keyboard and returned the file to its original state. This is a file in my own computer, so please don’t change it by yourself!

“I got it already! I’ll record them in more detail.” I consoled Alice. “Perhaps these cases were indeed meaningless..... But they should have once been important in certain people’s lives! There was always people working their best in each of the cases, you should be very clear about this, isn’t that right, Alice?”

That was one of the most important facts that I learnt after becoming an assistant detective.

Completely irrelevant to most people, but irreplaceable to an extreme minority of people— most of the things that happen in this world are like this, so sometimes, the cries of a person cannot enter the ears of the surrounding people at all.

Just at these times, there would be a crowd of NEETs who usually perks up their ears to the sky to while off their time clearly hearing the sounds of crying.

That is why we work as detectives.

Alice glared at me in extreme dissatisfaction, and suddenly pressed her index finger on my chest in the end.

“..... Fine! But be sure not to record only the process of the incident!”

It was as though she was taking a glimpse into my eyes through the strange, colorful bottom of a sea.

“Just recording what you did, met and experienced in the case would be fine. Since you are using the precious time on my salary to record, only recording these things would be meaningful. Do you understand?” After thinking for quite some time, I nodded in the end.

Indeed— because these cases are still my story in the end.

And here, four extremely meaningless and ordinary cases are recorded. No drugs, no bag with two hundred million yen, no murder or gang disputes. Even so, to some people living in this world, these incidents are still incomparably real.

Of course, as I am typing on the keyboard right now, I am one of those people as well. I truly hope that you can realize that you are one of them as well when you read.

Everyone, lift your chest up and play.

The numbers on your backs will be retired numbers of all the Kintetsu Buffaloes.

Nashida Masataka

The Origins of Hanamaru's Soup

This was the third case that I encountered after becoming an assistant detective— In other words, it occurred after the Angel Fix uproar. As it happened when I had just started to record the cases, it was really hard to name that incident appropriately. The whole case was like the thin noodles of ramen tangled with the straps of a bra. Even though it didn't take a long time, it was extremely confusing and idiotic. I changed the title to the aforementioned only because of Alice's criticism that the earlier names were too lacking and tasteless.

A lot of things did indeed happen in this period of time, but speaking from the results, it was actually just a story that happened before the ramen soup was completed.

*

The Yamanote Line and other private railways converged untidily at the large station near Hanamaru Ramen. One could find the shop in a dead alley with bad airing between short buildings just six minutes from the station on foot. As soon as night fell, salarymen would gather here, crowding up the shop in an instant, while the leftover customers would have to claim foldable chairs or overturned crates outside the shop— that was how the shop was.

Although the owner's skills improved substantially recently, it was still really hard to say that the shop's ramen was 'tasty' even in politeness. One of the reasons that this shop could still barely continue its business in such bad conditions was because the ice cream that the owner made due to personal interest was exceptionally scrumptious, and another was because the owner's breasts were really large. Well, that was what I personally think, anyway.

Min-san, the owner of the ramen shop, was a young woman. Standing in the

kitchen, she kept her long hair in a ponytail, her chest wrapped in a sarashi, and a long apron tied around her waist, covering the tank top she was wearing. Nobody knew Min-san's real name and age. A rude customer once asked for her age, and she promptly beat the person up. An even ruder customer asked for the size of her bra, and she said 'I don't buy these things', and beat the person up. And I had to wash bowls and cut onions beside such a person, earning a daily pay of 700 yen with my life on stake.

Speaking of which, I would occasionally think of this— Is working under a person whose name you don't know really in line with social norms? The school rules stated explicitly that part time jobs were forbidden, so I never mentioned this at school, and added with the fact that both of my parents weren't at home, while my sister who was in charge of looking after me was a permissive person, she didn't have anything to say even if I didn't return for two days— To put it bluntly, nobody actually cares who I work for at all.

This was what Alice told me when I mentioned this to her.

"I do not know Master's name as well, but I know her father's name. Her father was Hanada Masaru, the exact same name as the 66th [yokozuna](#), it seems. At first, he planned to use his name directly as the shop's name, but someone said that the name sounded weak, and so he removed the tones of 'da' and 'sa' [\[1\]](#), thus forming the current name 'Hanamaru'— that is how things are said to be, but I cannot affirm to its validity."

On the third floor of the building with the ramen shop, there was a room with a signboard saying 'NEET Detective Agency', while the owner of the room was this strange girl who called herself Alice. The room had air-conditioners going strong in all seasons, while the walls were full of computers and equipment. The low hum of machines functioning shrouded the whole room. A large bed was at the center of the room, while the girl who wore teddy-patterned pajamas, had long black hair and large doll-like eyes, Alice, usually sat on the bed with her slender legs extended.

I got to know Alice because of the incident that happened in winter. From that time on, I was in charge of sending ramen to the picky hikkikomori girl's

room, making her eat them all up. Unknowingly, it seemed to have turned into my daily routine as well.

“Why do you only know her father’s name?”

I estimated the time for Alice to finish her ramen, took out a can of Dr. Pepper and handed it to her while asking.

“Why? Because he is the person who signed the rental contract! Of course his name is on the contract.”

“..... Contract? Oh..... So Min-san’s dad is the owner of this building?”

So that’s why a ramen shop that had long got out of fashion was here..... Just when I finally understood slightly, Alice spoke:

“No no, I am the owner of the building.”

I nearly fell on my back.

“Why are you so surprised? If I am not the owner, can I still modify the room and install surveillance cameras as I like? You’ll know this just by using your brain a little.”

Giving me a disdainful look, Alice shrugged and pointed at the sixth small monitor arranged by her bed. The monitor was connected to the high-functionality surveillance cameras recording at all times that were set up around the building. Indeed, disregarding those in her own room, setting these things outside the room as she liked was a bit overboard.....

“Seriously, you really lack common sense of the community.”

You as a hikkikomori don’t have any right to say that! But I couldn’t talk back, and thus stayed mute.

“Strictly speaking, I did not sign the contract with Hanada Masaru-shi directly as well. He was already living here when I took over the building with illegal means.”

You took over the building with illegal means.....? Then I think it’s better not to ask how.

“..... Which means, you kept living on the rent for the rooms, huh?”

I nodded in understanding. After all, I thought that the source of income for this hikikomori girl was a mystery from a long time before. However, Alice immediately flew into a rage when she heard my words.

“What sort of rude comment was that! The rent for the building is directly deposited into the account of the legal owner, and I never even touched it! I just required an office! Although I know that your brain of sponge will not comprehend this no matter how many times I speak of it, let me speak of this once again— I work as a NEET detective, and earn a considerable amount of pay as a detective!”

“Sorry, it’s my fault, I apologize!”

Seeing that an empty Dr. Pepper can was about to fly over, I hurriedly covered my head and maintained a low position. The girl in pajamas is really a prideful (self-proclaimed) detective.

“Actually, it is fine with me even if I don’t collect rent for Master’s store, but she is a prideful ramen shop owner as well. Even if we don’t know each other’s true names, we still respect each other very much. That is why I allow her to meaninglessly continue depositing rent into the account of a shell company.”

Speaking of which, I don’t think I know Alice’s real name either. I just heard that her name was Yuuko.....

“Even so..... With your capabilities, aren’t you able to find out Min-san’s real name with just a little investigation?” I asked randomly while looked at the machine rack that loomed so tall behind her that they almost covered the whole wall.

“She never spoke of her name, which means she has no intention of letting me know. Don’t you even know the concept of privacy?”

“A person who steals files from other people everywhere online doesn’t really have the right to say that to me.....”

“That is all the more reason I cannot investigate! Even in her room, the NEET Detective can still search the whole world. Before such a detective, every personal message is like a naked body. That is why I must decide on a boundary that I must follow with my strong will.”

“You don’t say.....” You’re saying it like it’s real.

“Of course, there is some privacy that I do not respect. For instance, the names of the anime that you rented at Tatsuya^[2] yesterday are all in my grasp. Although I cannot say that it’s bad taste, the standard of moral ethics is really baffling as people under eighteen are actually able to rent videos with such content.....”

“GYAAAH, you wait just one minute!”

In a huge shock, I frantically grabbed the edge of the bed.

“Is my personal privacy really that meaningless!”

“Didn’t you rent the videos along the way when you went out yesterday to buy things for me? I only started investigation because you came back too late. This is an evident case of laziness while on duty!”

“Ngh..... But you didn’t have to check out even the contents!”

“If I did not investigate the contents thoroughly, I would have been unable to berate you effectively!”

“Aren’t you just looking for a fight? And how was I lazy while on duty! Is even going out on errands for you my job as well?”

“Is that wrong? From a long time ago, the job of an assistant detective was already to run errands for the detective and being bullied by the detective to reduce the detective’s stress!”

I weakly fell onto my knees. That’s right, I’m indeed this person’s assistant. Although I had no other choice due to various circumstances, currently, I regret it very much— and I don’t have a pay as well.

“You’re getting better at talking back recently, so it’s worth it for me to bully you. I’m really happy, you know! After all, you’re the only person who visits me here everyday like this.”

While saying that, Alice rested her chin on her raised kneecaps, her words completely unsuited with the innocent smile on her face. Seeing her look, I couldn’t say anything more as well.

*

Late that night, I packed away the portiere and lowered half of the steel gate. When I was noisily washing the plates and bowls, Min-san walked in from the kitchen door while carrying a cardboard box.

“Narumi, stay here for tonight.”

“..... What?”

“I’m changing the soup for the ramen. We’re going to cook soup the whole night!”

The cardboard box fell onto the desk with a ‘thud’. Inside, there were onions, carrots, dried mushrooms and thick rib bones. After that, Min-san took off her tank top, leaving only her sarashi on her upper torso— She entered battle mode.

“Um..... But I still have to go to school tomorrow.....”

“You can stay at my place for the night. I already called your sister. She even said that this will save her a meal’s worth of money!”

What’s wrong with this diplomacy without regard for the party concerned!

“Is it possible..... that you’re asking me to go to school tomorrow directly from here? No no no, how can this be possible.....”

“That’s fine, you can bathe at my place.” Min-san said while pointing at the door exiting the kitchen. The interior of the ramen shop connected directly to her room. Erm..... But it’s inconvenient in a lot of ways for young men and women to stay together under a roof for a night..... Can you please not do this, Aneki!

“..... Why are you changing the soup all of a sudden?”

I asked cautiously. Min-san stopped peeling the onions and glared at me.

“Do you remember the customer who came in at about eight tonight and ordered miso ramen? The one on the chair at the side.”

I pondered for a moment and remembered the customer that she spoke of.

“The one wearing shades?”

“That’s right. I saw him at the shop for the first time last week. It’s the third time this week.”

“Well aren’t you clear about this.....”

“That guy ordered soy sauce, salt-flavored and miso ramen in turn, but he actually left them alone after just one mouthful. Although I don’t know what person he is, but an action like that is just plain challenging me!”

If he thought that it was bad after just a mouthful, he shouldn’t have came back again. That person was indeed rather mystifying, but how did she see that as a challenge?

However, I did not have any room for rebuke. After all, I owed Min-san too much, and even if that weren’t so, this person wouldn’t have talked things over with me nicely as well. After all, she was an action-type person who would first beat people up to shut them up.

I sighed and took out a new soup pot from under the desk to wash it.

*

It was already late night when I heard that noise. I was sitting before the large pot that was stewed by a gentle fire, weakly stirring the ingredients inside.

I raised my head and looked around the dark ramen shop. The aroma of the rib bones soup was almost suffocating, and only sounds of showering water came from behind me. Min-san handed me the job of looking after the pot when she went to bathes, but I started to doze off during that time.

An odd noise rang out with the sound of water once again. At first, I thought that it was Min-san’s footsteps— but the sounds of the shower did not stop, and the direction of the noise wasn’t right as well.

The sound came from the deepest part of the corridors, the direction of the front door—

And it was approaching the sounds of showering?

I was shocked. In the house— someone else was there.

I lightly rose from the round stool, took off my shoes and walked towards the dark corridors, exiting through the kitchen door. An orange light was lit a few steps in front. It came from the bathroom. Apart from that, there was a shadow blocking the light from the bathroom, stirring at the entrance of the changing room.

I was in too much shock to remember that the wall was just behind me, and took a step back without further thought. With a ‘thud’, a light impact came behind me. A sound of something falling came by my foot as well. It was a beer bottle— and not waiting for me to remember the fact, the shadow already jumped.

“..... W-Who’s there!”

As though blasted away by my voice, the shadow almost flew away. The footsteps were devoured by the darkness in the corridors in an instant. The sound of the front door being roughly pushed open broke the spell. I finally came to my senses and chased the silhouette.

The door was still open. Outside, it was the parking lot at nighttime. The light of the streetlights barely shone in the space surrounded by buildings at three sides, and the silhouette just now had long disappeared without a trace.

He escaped. I weakly knelt on the cement floor of the entrance. What person was that? A thief?

“— What’s wrong?”

Sounds of speaking suddenly rang behind me, and I hurriedly turned around in shock, but instead stumbled into a sitting position on the floor.

Min-san’s face was just before me, a red flush on her skin after her bath. As she bent down to look at me with only a towel on, those breasts..... Um..... Wouldn’t it be harmful for your health if you keep things of that size wrapped in a sarashi? No, now isn’t the time to think about that, I have to calm down.



“Well.... W-Why don’t you put on some clothes first?”

“Nn? But it’s really hot recently!”

Stop fanning yourself by pulling on the towel before your chest!

I first locked up the front door before pushing Min-san into the corridors to explain what happened just now.

“..... A thief?” Min-san wiped her hair with a raised eyebrow. “I don’t even have anything valuable to steal over here!”

Shouldn’t you be more concerned of your own safety? Someone actually barged in while you were stark naked! This person really didn’t have any sense of danger.....

“Anyway, we’ll have to do some investigations. And also, please lock the front door well!”

“I did lock it! And besides, nobody even uses the door over there.”

That’s true. If so, where did that guy come in from?

“Ahhhhh!” Min-san suddenly cried out when she returned to the changing room.

“What happened?”

Her eyes burning with the flames of fury, Min-san rushed out and finally crashed into me.

“My sarashi that I left there to dry disappeared!”

*

The next afternoon.

“Narumi? You look really bad. Didn’t you sleep?”

Tetsu-senpai asked the instant he saw me cleaning up the road in front of the ramen shop.

“..... Really? I was sleeping through every period.....”

Recently, I kept thinking of why I go to school.

“Just hurry up and drop out! It’ll be a miracle if you can move up successfully.”

Although I was rather unwilling to admit it, Tetsu-senpai was right. After all, I barely went to school during the third semester, so it was not easy at all for me to pass the make-up exam that was like a raging hurricane.

“You can always ask me if you want to know how to drop out! After becoming a NEET, you can sleep until noon everyday, and that’s better for the health as well!”

“It seems like senpai is healthy every day.....”

Tetsu-senpai dropped out of the high school I am currently studying at three years ago. It is said that he was once a boxer. This person had brown skin, a thick chest, while his exposed arms were unbelievably muscular. I met him for the first time in November last year, and he was in this short-sleeved get up through the whole winter. The few people who usually haunted the ramen shop were usually oblivious to the seasons when it comes to their clothing, and senpai was one of them.

“Master, I’m starved today, so I’ll gobble up even failed works! Anything good to eat?”

Tetsu-senpai triumphantly strolled into the ramen shop that was in preparation stage and there still weren’t any customers, but ran out immediately after being roared at by Min-san:

“SHUTUPANDGETOUTYOUJOBLESSBUMINDEBT!”

“..... Say, she seems to be in a particularly bad mood today. Did anything happen?”

Senpai hurriedly pulled me to the special seat made of worn out tires, gasoline tanks and plastic baskets for beer that was at the back of the ramen shop and continued his questions.

“And also, why is Master’s sarashi blue today? What’s that?”

“Ah— That? I heard that it was a piece of cloth left over from the portiere. Well, her sarashi went missing.”

Tetsu-senpai tilted his head in puzzlement, and I had no other choice but to explain things that occurred the day before. After hearing my words, an expression that was between a wry smile and confusion surfaced on his face. It was rather strange.

"I say, that person..... probably wasn't a thief, but a stalker, isn't he?" He said, " If he wanted to steal something, he would've ran off when he heard sound of water from the bathroom. Not only run away, he would've probably be afraid of coming in if he saw lights in the bathroom, wouldn't he?"

That sounded reasonable.

"Did you see his face?"

"It was rather dark in the house that time....."

Judging from build, it was probably a man.

"Master, did he sneak a peek in the bathroom?"

Tetsu-senpai poked his head through the kitchen backdoor.

"No matter how dense I am, I would have noticed if someone was peeking from the door, okay!"

"Shouldn't that count as failing to peek? But why would he steal a sarashi of all things?"

"Yeah, when you mention it....."

Min-san's hands that were cutting the cabbage suddenly stopped. She raised her head to stare at thin air.

"My sarashi going missing seemed to have happened last week as well. I even thought that I mistakenly threw it away that time."

Wait a minute. That means—

Tetsu-senpai and I met gazes. At these times, senpai's movements would be especially quick. He immediately took out his cellphone and started dialing.

"..... Is this Alice? Yeah, it's me. Have you heard of Master's issue? Not yet? Is that so, uh huh....."

He quickly explained the entire matter.

'I understand. Call Major and Hiro over right away. Tell Master to come over to the office when the two of them reaches.'

After saying that, Alice hung up.

*

"Vice-admiral Fujishima, it's been a while! I heard that you've successfully advanced in your education, is that true?"

After thirty minutes, those were the first words that Major spoke to me when he reached Hanamaru Ramen on his scooter. And the Vice-admiral Fujishima that he spoke of would be me.

Although Major was the same age as Tetsu-senpai, he was of a much smaller stature than I, and his skin was white and smooth like that of a primary student. That day, he was wearing his camouflage shirt and hat with baggy military trousers that had loads of pockets. A pair of goggles-styled glasses hung on his neck.

"Vice-admiral Fujishima, I'm so disappointed in you! Getting red in five subjects is an incredible chance! Not having any experience of staying the year will set you back on being an excellent NEET!"

"No, I'm not planning to be a NEET at all!"

"What are you talking about! Vice-admiral Fujishima, you don't have any choice other than being a NEET in the future, you know that as well, don't you?"

"Yeah yeah, hurry up and get upstairs! Alice is asking for you."

Major's butt was kicked by Tetsu-senpai, and he reluctantly walked into the gorge between the buildings, clambering up the emergency stairs. I could only sigh. For some reason, these people kept thinking of pulling me into the path of a NEET. Having school attendance that barely passed the school rules and five subjects to retake for the semester finals— does my future really look so dim to the others like this? Perhaps that's exactly it in the others' eyes, huh? But that was a given.

“It’s best if Master and Narumi goes as well.”

Hearing Tetsu-senpai’s words, Min-san and I glanced at each other, some distance apart.

“Why must I go as well?”

“You’re the victim! And Narumi’s the eyewitness! You might notice something if you see the video recording. Just leave the shop to me!”

“I’m making a new soup!”

“Which one is more important, your own safety or the soup?”

“The soup, of course!”

Seeing that a mystifying fight was about to occur, I hurriedly wedged myself between them.

I explained to Min-san that it probably wouldn’t take a long time and finally convinced her to head to Alice’s office with me.

Major sat on the cramped space before the bed with his laptop computer open, and was talking to Alice about something. The moment we stepped into the room, Alice immediately raised her head.

“Why hello there, Master. It’s been a while since you came to my house..... Waaa!”

Min-san unhesitatingly walked to the bed and pushed Major away, extended her arm to pass through Alice’s armpits and raised her small body.

“W-What are you doing! Hurry up and put me down!”

“Why didn’t you grow at all? Did you really eat everything obediently? I even secretly put some more meat in them lately!”

“What? That is just too despicable! Everyone has a size suited for themselves, so don’t think that you can increase their volume just by adding carbohydrates!”

Alice struggled frantically with her feet bare, but since she was a weak hikkikomori, she was still raised high in the air for quite some time.

“Whatever, I’ll slowly increase the portion for the food after this anyway. Narumi, you’re in charge of making her eat them all up!”

With that, Min-san finally put Alice down on her bed, while Alice puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

“So? What did you call me up for?”

“We’re searching for the images recorded by the surveillance cameras.” Major answered while his eyes were still glued to the monitor. “You said that there was a thief before this as well, didn’t you? How long ago was that?”

“A long long time ago! Do you still have a record of something that happened such a long time ago?”

“We have records of the latest two months!” Major answered triumphantly. It was said the surveillance camera system was made by Alice and Major.

“Hmm..... When was that again? I seem to recall that it was last week.....?”

“It’ll take a long time if you can’t remember it. After all, it’s really hard to determine a range for the search on the screen.”

“Ah! I remember now! It was the day when the guy with shades came for salt-flavored ramen. That night, I went back to the shop again to try making soup after washing my clothes, and it went until late night.”

“The guy with shades? Who’s that?”

“Oh nothing, just a customer who annoyed me somewhat.”

That was how Min-san answered.

I suddenly felt a sense of strangeness.

The intruder— assuming that the one who stole the sarashi the first time was the same one— had twice broken in on a night when the peculiar customer who ordered ramen but only ate a mouthful showed up.

What sort of relationship existed between the two? No, the man with shades was rather stocky. I thought back on the thief that I saw in the darkness. Although his facial features couldn’t be clearly seen, from his overall silhouette, it was indeed quite far apart from that customer.

“Didn’t it happen on Thursday?” “What time did that happen?” “God knows!” Can you recognize that person from the video?” “You didn’t film the shop, how do I know?”

Min-san poked her head out from behind Major while muttering.

“The entrance of Min-san’s house and the shop..... wasn’t filmed?” I tried to ask Alice.

“Didn’t I already say this? I respect personal privacy a lot. Besides, these surveillance cameras are here to prevent uninvited guests from coming to my house, so nothing is filmed except for the road outside and the area near the stairs.

Alice shrugged.

In the end, the recording was only seen about once before Min-san’s limited patience was used up. Nothing of value was discovered. Thus, she left Major and went back to the shop.

“Why you, who gave you permission to eat it?”

In the kitchen, Tetsu-senpai was holding a steaming bowl, causing Min-san to explode the instant she saw him. So Tetsu-senpai cooked some ramen to eat..... Oh please, and you actually put so much chashu!

“What matter does that make! Just treat it as my pay for taking care of the shop.”

“It matters a whole lot! And you actually ate my new work? I haven’t even tasted it myself!”

Tetsu-senpai lightly evaded Min-san’s lashing fists, finishing up the food in the bowl in an instant. As expected of an ex-boxer.

“Thanks for the meal!”

“Blast.....”

After kicking Tetsu-senpai out of the kitchen, Min-san took out two new bowls, poured soy sauce soup and broth, making two bowls of soup.

“Narumi, you try it as well.”

“Ah..... Okay.”

I moved to the outer side of the counter and sat down by Tetsu-senpai’s side. After that, I picked up the spoon and swallowed a mouthful.

“..... Hmm—“

The fresh taste of kelp and fragrance of dried mackerels immediately spread out in my mouth, so it wasn’t really bad. But even though it wasn’t bad.....

“How is it? Say it clearly!”

It was really a taste hard to comment on. Min-san picked up the bowl for a sip as well, and her mouth immediately bent into a ^.

The one who first broke the silence was Tetsu-senpai.

“If you’re aiming at a Japanese flavor..... Your old man made it better.”

Min-san’s shoulders shook visibly. As she had her head lowered with a bowl in her hands, the expression on her face couldn’t be clearly seen.

“This new soup is probably made in imitation of your old man, isn’t it? I think the previous soup tastes better.”

Min-san neither got angry nor rebuked him, but just poured away the soup in the bowl. I was rooted to my original spot, and could only look at the expressions of the two in turn.

Her old man’s soup?

Min-san wasn’t a talkative person, but she once talked to me about her father as well. I heard that her father suddenly left her daughter and the ramen shop, disappearing just like that. Because of that, Min-san gave up on her dream to become an ice cream chef, choosing to inherit Hanamaru Ramen instead.

It was a long time after that when I came to the shop. That was why I could not know what kind of taste the soup had when Min-san’s father was the chef there.

“— Narumi, what do you think?”

My gaze fell on the amber soup in the bowl, and I raised my head to look at Min-san after that.

“The taste doesn't seem well-matched..... But that might be because I was looking at the process of its production, so I just had this feel that I could recognize the ingredients inside.”

But there wasn't any 'ramen soup' feel.

“Is that so.....”

Min-san pursed her lips in slight self-deprecation, took down the large pot from the stove and poured the whole pot of soup and ingredients away. For a moment, the kitchen was filled with thick puffs of heat.

“So I just can't make it as good as my old man's! And I never asked for the recipe and method as well.....”

While stuffing the remains of the soup into a plastic bag, Min-san said while shaking her head.

“But my old man probably never thought I would take over the shop as well.....”

“So that's why?”

“Ever since I entered a confectionery school, he seemed to have given up already, and never mentioned the matter at all. He probably thought that it didn't matter any more. Both me and the shop, we didn't matter to him anymore.....”

It didn't matter anymore.....

So that was why he suddenly left everything and went missing? Well, I can't say that I'm really clear of the process of Min-san's father going missing as well.

“He might just come back one day!”

Tetsu-senpai muttered. Min-san smiled while shaking her head.

“He won't come back anymore! It's already been five years. He might not even remember me anymore. Or he might have died long ago!”

That was the first time I saw Min-san wearing a lonely expression.

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That night, when the seats in the shop were all full and the customers were bursting out of the shop, Hiro-san hurriedly rushed into Hanamaru Ramen.

“I heard that Min-san got targeted by a stalker?”

A customer nearly stood up, another nearly spat out his ramen, while another spilled his teacup. Min-san’s hand that was holding the kitchen knife stopped, and she stared blankly at Hiro-san, who was standing at the shop entrance.

That day, Hiro-san was wearing a beige blazer with a Polo shirt and a single-colored tie. As usual, his trendy get-up was completely out of place in the ramen shop far away from the busy districts. Actually, this person was just a NEET who was the same age as Tetsu-senpai and Major.

“..... What are you talking about? Hurry up and scram to the back. Don’t bother the customers over here.” Min-san said in annoyance.

“Isn’t Hiro-san a bit late?”

Major just left Alice’s office and poked his head in from the backdoor.

“Sorry, I was driving the ladies who were drinking with me last night back to Chiba, and just came back. Ah! Sheesh, so Tetsu is here as well?”

Hiro-san said while moving to the back of the ramen shop.

Three sides of the dark space behind the ramen shop was surrounded by buildings, while there were gas tanks, old tires, plastic baskets and a wooden stand that was a replacement for a table there. It had long turned into the gathering spot for NEETs.

“So the idiots are all here?”

Min-san shook her head somewhat unhappily. But since they were customers as well, I pushed the back door open and took their orders.

“Narumi, why don’t you sit down as well! We’re starting our tactical meeting.”

“Ack!”

Tetsu-senpai pulled my apron and forced me to sit down on the gas tank.

“But..... I still have to work.....”

“As there was a limited number of surveillance cameras, we just couldn’t get a clear image.....”

Completely ignoring my protests, Major started to explain by himself. Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai leaned forward as well, staring at the laptop computer on the center of the wooden stand.

“I’m checking out a silhouette that kept loitering near the ramen shop these two weeks. He always appeared at night, about one in the morning.”

“But his face couldn’t be seen?”

“Well, the distance was too far, and the light was too dim!”

I took a look from behind at the video taken as well. Videos of the surroundings of the building appeared in a few windows, and almost all of them were so dark that they were really unclear. Only the legs of the person spying in the shadows of the opposite building shone on by the streetlights could barely be seen, or a few unnatural shadows moving in the darkness.

“Is that really the stalker?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“Hiro-san, you understand stalkers very well, don’t you?”

“Of course! Night club ladies and those in the ‘special’ profession always face them! I even met a few stalkers directly when I stayed at women’s houses before this as well.”

As expected of a gigolo.

“Min-san, have you ever received any silent phones recently? Or did you see anything strange in your mailbox?”

Hiro-san directed his question into the kitchen through the backdoor. Say, if there were really such obvious movements, Min-san should have realized that there was a stalker no matter how dense she was. Just when I was thinking that, Min-san answered directly:

“Silent phones? Ah..... I’m getting those quite often recently.”

What did you say?

“And also..... I found a lot of my photos in my letterbox as well.”

That reeks of a stalker no matter how you look at it! I could almost hear everyone doing tsukkomis in their hearts. Seriously, why does this person ignore abnormal situations like this completely?

“W-Wait a minute, you said photos..... What kind of photos are they?” Hiro-san started to get anxious.

“Nn? Nothing really..... Just some photos of myself working in the shop or going out to buy stuff occasionally! Who on earth would take photos like this? There are really some strange people who would really do meaningless things like this.”

“It seems like the opposing party’s stealthy photo-taking skills aren’t much..... Hmph! An unprofessional stalker!”

Major muttered to himself somewhat triumphantly. Can you please not feel triumphant because of things like this!

“Oi, you bunch of jobless bums, hurry up and let Narumi come back for his work if you’re not ordering! There’s almost a hill of cutlery here now!”

Min-san roared.

“But we can’t pretend we don’t know anything in such a situation.....”

Hiro-san lowered his voice. He was right, it was already an obvious criminal act.

“Do we need to call the cops?” Major asked somewhat unhappily.

“A stalker doesn’t count as a stalker if the party concerned didn’t notice him, does he?”

“So that’s why the few of us have to think of something!”

“But that person doesn’t seem like she would give us a request! She doesn’t feel like she’s a victim at all, does she?”

These people who took pride in being hardcore NEETS— although they would be bored to death without a job, they would only take action when they received a request. Or else, they would rather mutter in a dark alley, cocking their ears to listen to the voice of the city.

Thus, the gazes of the three naturally focused on myself.

Ah, here we go again.....

Now that I think of it, that time, I still wasn't accustomed to my role as an assistant detective, and seemed to be always given troublesome jobs. (Um, why does that still seem to be the case right now?)

I returned to the kitchen with the gazes of the trio outside completely focused on my back. I picked up the sponge and started to clean the bowls in the sink while asking softly.

"Erm..... Min-san....."

"What!"

Min-san was staring at the ramen dancing in the water with a solemn gaze.

"Wouldn't it be better if you request Alice and the three to look into this?"

"Look into what?"

"And you're asking me what to look into..... Didn't your house get broken in recently?"

"I'll lock the doors and windows properly! If they can still break in even so, wouldn't beating them up suffice?"

I could only sigh. As I saw Min-san knocking out four drunken thugs looking for trouble with my own eyes, I knew that the reasoning of 'a woman living alone will often encounter dangerous situations' could not convince her.

So what should I do?

I pondered for some time and finally steeled myself to speak.

"..... Your sarashi..... Wasn't it stolen?"

Min-san's brows furrowed when she heard those words when she was piling up a small hill of onions and bean sprouts.

"Right now, the offender must be using the sarashi in disastrous matters."

"Huh? What kind of disastrous matters?"

"..... Say, something like picking it up and sniffing it?"

Min-san's expression changed visibly.

"Shut up! Why are you saying such disgusting things!"

"Sheesh! So the thief only stole her sarashi?" a frequent customer with his face red because of the consumption of two bottles of beers started to laugh. As the shop was quite small, even conversations in a low voice could be clearly heard by the customers on the counters.

"So that's why you're wearing a sarashi with color?"

Another frequent customer on the neighboring seat stared at Min-san's breasts.

"That's true..... Stealing a thing like that, it can't be used in any way other than sniffing it....."

"For me, I'll sniff it as well."

"If it's Min-san's, count me in."

After gulping down alcohol, the drunken customers started to say so one after another. Min-san cried out with her face green:

"Why are everyone saying that! Shut up, it's really gross!"

"I....." want to sniff too— I nearly said that out loud with them, but fortunately stopped myself in time. I won't do something like that. Of course not.

After that, Min-san stayed silent, but would occasionally lower her head to look at her breasts while cooking ramen. It seemed like my words had an effect on her.

But I really couldn't say it was something to show off for.

Min-san only muttered while keeping the poached eggs in a container when the customers on the seats gradually left, and the peak hour of business passed.

"..... I get it already! If you can find a way, do whatever you like!"

Just when I was about to forward the words to them after opening the door, Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro-san had long stood up energetically. Hiro-san held his cellphone by his ear and was happily talking on the phone: "Oh, Alice? Yeah,

it's me. Min-san gave us the request. Yeah, we're starting right away..... Yep, yep, we're counting on you then." Seriously, so these loafers kept eavesdropping with their ears perked up?

Anyway, the NEET Detective Squad started moving just like that. That was on the second night after the incident happened.

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Speaking of which, though they started their movements, I didn't have any particular task. I still had to go to the ramen shop after school as usual, stay up to accompany Min-san who was making a new soup, send food to Alice, and being bullied by her along the way.

"It's natural that an assistant detective is like this! The word 'useless' is included in its definition as well."

Alice said such overboard things without even batting an eyelid.

"And also, do not think that you can contribute anything to the world. Perhaps you care for this world very much, but this world actually does not particularly care for you."

Holding a can of Dr. Pepper, Alice waved her sockless legs on her bed while sneering at me.

"That thought is really too much....."

I leaned my back on the side of the fridge and sat on the floorboards while stirring the vanilla ice cream with cranberry sauce in the paper cup, muttering to myself in despair.

"But this is the truth! Humans can only grow after learning about this. Well, many people do not realize this in their whole lives, dying in vain just like that as well....."

If so, continuing to be an innocent child seems fine as well. Speaking of which, why must my life be criticized by a hikkikomori NEET like this?

"It's okay, Narumi. Even if everything else in this world ignores your existence, only I will still be worried for you."

Those words really couldn't help but make people's hearts accelerate, but Alice continued after that:

"After all, if you do not come here anymore, I will have to get the Dr. Pepper from the fridge by myself."

I sighed and leaned my head on the fridge.

"You can pick a better way of saying things if you want to console me. Do I really have nothing else that I can do?"

"I was not consoling you, but merely describing the truth. That's right, hand the ice cream over after you finish stirring it!"

I somewhat unhappily handed the paper cup containing ice cream to Alice. The girl in pajamas really had weak arms, as the action of stirring the hard ice cream with a spoon was enough to make her breathless.

"Try thinking of the conditions that God bestowed upon you that Tetsu, Major and Hiro does not have. Please do use your brain sometimes."

Conditions that the three did not have, and was only owned by me.

I thought for awhile and thought of something.

"..... Only I am working at the ramen shop?"

"Exactly. Which means, you are the closest with the target that we are protecting. Well, although you had next to no effect when the intruder appeared last time..... That is why I am telling you to keep your ears peeled, eyes open and focus on washing the dishes. If you notice anything or see any strange people, tell me immediately."

After that, I remembered the odd customer in shades that only came ate a mouthful after ordering miso ramen who came to the shop on the day the burglar appeared. Speaking of which, it seemed like I had not mentioned that to Alice yet.

"Although this might be somewhat unrelated—"

When I spoke of the matter, Alice's brows immediately twitched.

"You..... Why did you not speak of this earlier! Your denseness makes me

speechless. The decay of protons is fast compared with the speed of your brain moving. On what basis do you judge that the person is irrelevant to the matter? How do you know without further investigation? If you continue to keep your mouth tightly closed like a clam.....”

“I’m sorry.....”

If I left her alone, I would probably get a twenty minutes scolding, so I could only interrupt Alice and apologize, while she immediately turned her head around to face the monitor.

“Anyway, I will have to search first. Although a recording of the shop premise does not exist, he should be captured on a surveillance camera when he enters or exits. As we can lock on to a date and time, things will be much simpler.”

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It was already over five in the evening when I left the detective agency and returned to the lower floor. Min-san was about to flip the wooden sign on the door with ‘In Preparation’ to ‘Open Now’, while by her side was Major, who was unusually early. He knelt on the floor, holding a peculiar gadget that looked like a mini magnifying glass, checking out the sliding door of the ramen shop entrance.

“Major, what are you doing?”

“Investigating the invasion route of the criminal.”

It takes a thief to catch a thief, the words suddenly floated into my mind.

“He didn’t come in from the shop, because I was sitting right over there that time.”

I pointed at the counter.

“You were probably dozing off while sitting there, weren’t you?”

Min-san was spot on, and I could only shrink my neck.

“Hmm, he would probably be filmed on the surveillance camera if he came in from the front, so it’s actually quite impossible. But to be sure, it’s best if we

check it out.”

Major spoke while standing up.

“The door at the back didn’t have any sign of being pried open as well..... Min-san, have you ever dropped your keys?”

“But all of my keys are here.”

“Then perhaps he came in from the windows? How puzzling..... Vice-admiral Fujishima, did the suspect immediately throw the front door open and scarper? Did he take a long time to open the door?”

“Well.....” I tried hard to recall the situation that night. “He did indeed open the door to run away right away.”

“If one chose to climb in from the windows, an expert of illegal infiltration like me will definitely affirm a route of escape, that is common sense. But to a guy who’s spying on people when he couldn’t even take photos without permission..... It’s hard to imagine that he has such intelligence!”

Hey hey hey, I won’t pretend I never heard that, you know? A person like you..... actually avoided capture up till today, you’re just too lucky.

“In any case, let’s strengthen the security first! We can start by pasting anti-theft film and installing an anti-theft bolt on the windows. It’s safer to change the lock of the front door as well.”

“The front door?”

Min-san crouched through the counter to return to the kitchen and frowned when she was tying up her apron.

“The lock of the front door..... can’t be changed.”

“Why? Even though the lock didn’t have any signs of being pried open, such an outdated spring lock is still very unsafe!”

“Just don’t. Do whatever you want with the windows, just don’t touch the front door.”

Min-san’s tone was rather stern. Major and I exchanged glances. Why? Was it because she didn’t want to deal with it due to being troublesome? But the

landlady was Alice, so we didn't need to tell her all of the details at all. Besides, wouldn't it be fine just to hand it all to Major?

"Narumi, prepare to start work!"

"Ah, okay."

I only rushed into the kitchen in a fluster when Min-san started to roar at me.

*

That night, I was still accompanying Min-san in her quest to make a new soup. It felt like I didn't go home for a whole week already. I had almost forgotten what my sister looked like.

Late night, only the low hum of the ventilator could be heard in the kitchen. The Rishimi kelp (specially for business, the type that's cut into thin strips) had long been half used up, as she had to use a whole pot of kelp to stew her new soup.

"..... It stinks of seaweed."

After adding some soy sauce, I sipped a mouthful of soup and immediately expressed my thoughts. Min-san's expression clouded over, but it seemed like she felt unsatisfied as well, so she did not get angry.

"The taste of kelp seems more obstructive now. Would it be better if we don't add in dried mushrooms?"

"Is that so?"

"It feels less and less like soup for ramen. Did the ones made by your father taste like this?"

I only realized my mistake after asking, and could only sneak a peek at Min-san's expression. Her gaze was full of confusion, like a cheetah mistakenly kept in an elephant zoo. It was the first time I saw her with an expression like that.

"Actually I don't really remember them now." Min-san said while showing a slightly lonely smile. "Before this, I kept making ice cream and would get into fights whenever I meet my old man, so I didn't eat his ramen often at all."

"It's already nice that you can squabble with him. I don't even have any impression of having spoken to my dad at all."

"Hmph!" Min-san smiled coldly. "So you want to change dads with me? Let me tell you, that guy always acts impulsively! Once, he suddenly said that he felt like fishing on a Saturday night, and then dragged me to run all along to a beach at Chiba....."

"R..... Ran all along?"

"He's an idiot who likes to work out!"

Min-san said while narrowing her eyes in nostalgia.

"Why..... Now that I think back on it, maybe he just didn't know what to say to me? My mom died quite suddenly as well. It just feels like..... he only started to be more oppressive when only the two of us were left."

Hearing those words, I suddenly realized that Min-san's circumstances were quite similar to that of mine. My mother passed away long ago, and my father turned strange after that as well.

"Even though he knew that I didn't like it, he still forced me to follow him everywhere. If it's not a snowy mountain somewhere around, it would be a super faraway island."

"That's probably because..... he was lonely, huh?"

When the words came out, Min-san suddenly showed a gentle smile.

"That might be so! Men are really stupid. Won't saying it out be fine!"

I thought that nobody was harder than frankly expressing our own troubles. That was one of the facts that I learnt using a whole winter.

"Actually going missing all of a sudden as well..... Then why did he insist that I had to inherit the ramen shop before this! In the end, he just thought that it didn't matter what I did!"

With her hands on the chopping block, Min-san lowered her head. Did she still resent her father?

Or perhaps— she actually wants to see him again?

My gaze fell on the large amount of kelp swimming in the pot. His father's soup— Min-san couldn't inherit its taste.

Perhaps because she realized my thoughts, Min-san raised her head.

"Enough about my old man, he's irrelevant to this matter. It's just because the appraisals on his ramen's taste wasn't bad."

Min-san smiled faintly and poked my forehead.

That moment, the ringtone of 'Colorado Bulldog' rang. It was Alice.

'Come over to the office for a moment. I have something to confirm with you.'

I looked at Min-san. She said : "It's fine, just go. I'm going to take a bath after clearing away the stuff."

"I'll go right away."

I answered. After that, I put away my phone.

"I've watched all of the recordings and noticed something peculiar."

On the bed in the detective agency, Alice told me with her back on me while typing on the keyboard.

"Regarding the strange person with shades that we mentioned before this, he did indeed come to the shop last Thursday and Monday the week before, correct?"

"Yep."

Alice turned over and pointed at the six monitors arranged on the floor by the bed.

"But the surveillance camera did not capture such a person at all. Did you mistake the date? I even checked out the recordings one day before and after as well."

"..... Eh? Why's that?"

"That's what I want to ask you! From the recordings, I lifted the features of the men in the shop. You can confirm if the person is among them."

Alice waved at me. Although I was somewhat nervous, I still clambered onto the bed, approaching her side. One of the monitors displayed a full screen of portraits.

“These are the customers who came to the shop these few days. Do not miss anything. It is possible that the person put on his sunglasses only after he entered the shop.”

I repeatedly looked through the portraits of the tens of people for about half an hour. As they were images lifted from a recording, some people were not facing the camera, and the quality was rather rough as well, so it was quite hard to identify anyone.

“..... I don’t see that person.”

“Is that so? Fine, I shall trust your eyes and ears for now. After all, you barely have any other strengths. Your good eyesight and hearing might be gifts from God to you.”

Oh, shut up.

“However, there is something that I am puzzled about.”

“Didn’t you say that there aren’t any surveillance cameras directly facing the interior of the shop? Besides, that person could avoid the other surveillance cameras deliberately while entering and exiting.”

“Although it is not impossible, people who can do so must clearly know the positions of the six surveillance camera. Regarding the installation of the cameras, I only told the tenants of the building. Basically, it is not likely for outsiders to know of this.”

But..... It’s possible that he just wasn’t filmed on coincidence, isn’t it? Alice seemed to have seen through my naïve thoughts, and she spoke:

“I shall consider the possibility. I just feel that this matter is not like a simple theft, so the inability to attack actively is very vexing. Currently, I can only ask Hiro and Tetsu to help keep an eye open, and ask Major to strengthen the security measures. The lock of the front door was just an ordinary spring lock, so it will be easy to pry it open if one wishes to do so.”

“But Major said that there weren’t any signs of it being pried open after he checked it out. Does any other people have keys to Min-san’s house?”

“I have a spare key on me over here, and Master should have two there instead. Why are you looking at me with this gaze? Are you perhaps suspecting someone of stealing the spare key from me?”

“No..... Not really, I’m just thinking of the possibility.....”

“Please do not look down on the security system of my room. Bringing Persephone back from the underworld will be easier than taking the spare keys away from me.” Alice said while puffing out her flat chests triumphantly. “But still, changing the lock will be more appropriate. Didn’t Major say that he could do that already?”

“That’s true.....” I thought back on Min-san’s odd reaction that time. “But Min-san wasn’t willing to do it, so we couldn’t change the lock.”

Alice’s eyes completely lost its color in an instant. Then, her large eyes widened even more.

“..... I see..... So that’s why. I understand now.”

Alice nodded by herself, as though she just realized something.

“So that’s why things are like this..... The door was open in the first place. The surveillance camera didn’t manage to film him as well. So that’s why..... Hmm.....”

“..... What is is? Did you think of something?”

“Yes, I have understood everything.”

The detective proclaimed thus directly. I was dazed, and could only stare at the side of the doll-like face.

Understood..... everything?

“What..... happened?”

“Just that. The features of the case have surfaced more or less, oh.....”

Seeing that I was about to open my mouth once again, Alice suddenly pressed her index finger on my lips. I was shocked, and reflexively swallowed my

questions while taking a large step back.

“Do not ask now. I have once said, the NEET Detective can grasp the truth even when she is on this bed, but that is the truth, but not the facts.”

“But—”

“And there is another thing. Unfortunately, the truth that I have just obtained is completely unhelpful to the victim, Min-san. And telling her would cause her to scold you as well. Hoho..... Facing the people happily living below the sunlight, the messenger of the dead is helpless to the extent of despair, because we can only dig out words that were lost.”

Alice’s gaze moved away from my face.

The helplessness of facing the world.

The shadow of fate in Alice’s heart— I once got a glimpse at it during my previous cases as well. But she didn’t need to be so self-berating even with such a small matter, did she? At least, that was what I personally thought.

She extended her small hands and covered her eyes, staring at blank air while muttering:

“That is why..... You must call me when you catch the criminal. I must once again reaffirm if I am able to muster whatever courage I have to step out of this castle, touching this world with my own hands, and to turn the truth to facts through questions and the answers of the criminal.”

After a long time, Alice finally turned around to face me.

“This is a promise.”

Those eyes looked wet because of the overflowing of tears.

I stayed silent for some time, and finally lightly held the hand that Alice extended.

*

About eight that night, the man in shades appeared in Hanamaru Ramen for the fourth time.

That afternoon, I played handball for two consecutive hours during P.E period, and I rode my bike to a handicrafts shop to buy new cloth to be used as Min-san's sarashi before my part time job started, so I was tired to half death when I returned to the shop. It just had to be on this kind of day that there were a lot of customers. The customers sitting outside ordered beer and fried dumplings one after another, so I didn't notice for a moment that the man was already sitting on a temporary beer crate seat.

“..... Ah, welcome.”

It felt like my gaze met the guy in shades' directly. The man before my eyes was about fifty something. He was stout as a bear, while his shoulders and chest were quite muscular as well.

When I sent iced water to him, I only managed to control the trembling of my hands after a huge effort.

“Sesame ramen!”

The man ordered ramen in a rough voice.

Back in the kitchen, I signaled to Min-san, and she immediately nodded, signifying that she already noticed long ago.

What kind of person was he?

After sending him the sesame ramen, I originally wanted to continue staring at him nonchalantly, but there were just too many customers in the shop, so I couldn't manage to notice so much at all.

I poked my head out of the backdoor to take a look at the area near the emergency backstairs, but only saw Hiro-san texting on his cellphone, sitting on the gas tank by himself.

“What is it?”

Hiro-san noticed me and shifted his gaze from the liquid plasma screen. I tried to tell him that the man in shades was in the shop with only my physical movements.

Hiro-san glanced at the front of the shop from the corner of the building and seemed to have understood. He nodded and said in a small voice:

“Got it, I’ll keep an eye on him. I’ll tail him after he’s done as well.”

After about five minutes when I was sending a large bowl of chashu ramen to the customers outside, the man had long disappeared. There was only a bowl of barely eaten sesame ramen and 800 yen coins left on the beer crate.

Hiro-san was missing as well.

Geez, what kind of person was that? What sort of relationship does he have with the stalker as well? Or did he come for a different purpose? I couldn’t help but get startled at my own thoughts. Although I wasn’t doubtful of Hiro-san’s stalking skills—after all, I myself had experience of being tailed by him as well—that person was extremely good at it. However.....

If there wasn’t only one stalker? I heard that there were some situations of criminal organizations as well. He might not even be a stalker, but appeared for a more deplorable motive.....

I still couldn’t rid the meaningless delusions in my mind when I cleared away the empty bowls and was washing my hands full of bubbles. Although I was at Min-san’s side, I could only look at the others taking actions.

After about an hour, Hiro-san returned to the ramen shop. That time, the crowd of customers had already returned, while the shop turned much quieter.

“I’ve been had! He gave me the slip.”

Hiro-san sat down on the gasoline tank, pounding on his thigh with clenched fists. After that, he raised his head to look at me and said in a small voice:

“That guy might just be a professional.”

“..... Professional? What kind of professional?”

“I’ve once tailed a professional private detective. It made me think of the situation that time when I was tailing that guy today..... Blast! Even though I’m so familiar with this area that I can go around in a circle with my eyes closed..... That guy must have discovered me. If not, he wouldn’t have especially waltzed into [Hands](#), slipping away from another side exit!”

I couldn't help but recall the maze-like floor plan of Tokyo Hands.

"In the end, I was given the slip after a large circle when we reached the station again. Ahhhh, blast, how unfortunate!"

"What kind of person *is* he?"

"That's what I want to know!"

Why would such a person be interested in Min-san? I was already unclear of everything, and couldn't help but start feeling rueful towards Alice, who looked all-knowing but wouldn't tell anything.

"In any case, let me call Tetsu and Major over first!"

Hiro-san said while taking out his cellphone.

"That guy appeared two times before this, and there was a thief twice. Perhaps the thief will appear tonight as well."

That moment, the prelude of 'Colorado Bulldog' suddenly blared from the phone Hiro-san was holding.

'It's me. You lost the guy in shades?'

"You saw it huh. Was he caught on camera?"

'No, he avoided being filmed perfectly. I only saw Narumi say something to you with his face green, and then you scuttled away, so I guessed if it was so.'

This person is still so uncomfortably sharp. Speaking of which, the surveillance cameras still couldn't film him? Is it possible that he really had a way to avoid the cameras?

Or was it because he was indeed as Hiro-san said, a 'professional'?

"And also, the thief might appear tonight as well, so I'm planning to call Tetsu and Major over....."

'No!'

Alice unhesitatingly interrupted Hiro-san's words.

"Why!"

Hiro-san raised his voice as well.

'And you still ask why? If the three of you hide in a dark spot with your eyes sparkling, the prey definitely won't fall into the trap!'

"Even so, we can'....."

'Like the thief's previous entry, just leave it to my assistant, who is currently in a daze by your side. He is a very good mosquito light. If my assumption is correct, everything will end tonight.'

Just when Hiro-san was about to say something else, she hung off.

Hiro-san glared at his phone for some time, snapped his phone closed and spun it in his hands, then sighed magnificently in the end. After that, he raised his head to look at me.

"— And there you have it. All the best!"

Hiro-san patted me on the shoulders, infecting me with his sigh as well.

*

Eleven in the night, after business hours ended. Once again, only Min-san and I were left in the kitchen full of steam.

"Sesame ramen won't do as well huh....."

Min-san sat on the round stood, muttering to herself with her shoulders slumped. Sesame ramen was a popular new flavor that appeared this year, and was the masterpiece Min-san was most confident in so far. However, the man in shades still stopped eating after only a mouthful.

"Um..... Well..... But that man was really just too suspicious! Perhaps he didn't leave them just because it tasted bad, and maybe he didn't come to the shop to eat ramen at all?"

I frantically consoled Min-san. Compared with the previous ones, the taste of the sesame ramen wasn't really so bad that she would need to despair over it.

"That doesn't matter at all! It's completely irrelevant to the man in shades, I'm the one who's feeling unsatisfied." Min-san said while shaking her head. On the small stove, a large number of kelps were swimming in the steaming hot

soup bowl.

“..... Is it better to stew the kelp soup longer? Or would changing the ratio to 4:1 be better? Changing the other ingredients to sesame oil and onions..... Not putting the whole chicken but just the bones.....?”

Min-san continued to murmur about how she should mix and match the many ingredients and suddenly stood up.

“I’ll go take a bath first to clear my mind.”

Seeing her take off her hairband holding her hair in a pony tail and swing her hair, my heartbeat couldn’t help but accelerate, nearly making me stand up.

“What are you blushing for?”

“Eh? Ah, n-nothing. Oh yeah, please be careful, because there might be strange people lurking around.”

“That doesn’t matter at all! I’m leaving the soup in the pot to you.”

Min-san disappeared from the kitchen after leaving the words. That person really thought nothing except for ramen..... A young girl saying ‘I’ll go take a bath’ (even when there isn’t any special meaning) will have a bad effect on teenagers! Can you please think for me albeit slightly?

I shook my head, flinging away the idiotic thoughts and continued sitting on the chair.

Similar to that night, I was the only one in the kitchen once again.

I heaved a deep sigh.

All the lights in the shop were switched off. The only radiance that came in view was the blue flame of the small gas stove.

Only the boiling sound of the soup and the dull noises uniquely owned by the gas stove of the restaurant could be heard. Not long after that, sounds of the shower came from behind as well.

After dimming the stove flame, the noise of the pot got even smaller. Then, I closed my eyes.

Narumi, only your powers of hearing is okay. So, you don’t need to approach

the front door, just take note of the sounds from the surroundings— I recalled Alice's words.

Mosquito lamp.

Deliberately making people feel that security was lax to lure the criminal into the trap. As for why— this was what Alice said:

Because I have questions for the criminal. To solve the mysteries that complicate the world, that is why I do so—

I put my hand into my pocket, grabbing the thing about the size of a cellphone.

Finally— my ears and the edge of my consciousness registered a faint noise.

The sound of the front door opening.

How odd— I couldn't help but think. Why didn't I hear the sound of the door unlocking? But now, I don't have any time to feel surprised for such a small matter. Some slightly drifting footsteps— the pitter-patter footsteps, as though someone was unsteadily walking on the wooden floorboards on tiptoe, gradually approached, while my heartbeats accelerated along with it as well. Is it okay with me alone? What if he had weapons on him? One step, two step..... I could clearly hear the footsteps getting nearer to the sound of water in the bathroom. After that, the footsteps stopped, and at that moment, I could almost see the silhouette of the criminal extending his hand towards the bathroom handle.

I sprang up and rushed into the corridor. Through the rays of light that came through the foggy glass of the bathroom door, I could see the unsteady silhouette turn around, flustered. I rapidly took out that thing from my pocket and threw it at the silhouette, and immediately turned around to face him with my back, shut my eyes and closed my ears.

A colossal sound that almost uncovered my hands blasted there, while blinding white light spun away the whole darkness in the corridor in an instant.

It was a Stun Shell that Major carefully concocted.

*

“You’re just plain harassing the neighbors!”

Min-san swung her steel fist down on my skull, and then added another hit on Major’s head, as he looked quite delighted that his trusty handmade weapon had such a great effect. Due to her threatening aura, even Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san reflexively flinched.

The criminal hunt ended in an instant. Rushing in from the front door, Tetsu-senpai defeated the criminal in one punch, tying him up with the wire Hiro-san provided with no further trouble. My pain only started when Min-san ferociously dashed out of the changing room with only a towel wrapped on her.

“People not in the know thought that it was a gas explosion! Can’t you people have a slight bit of social common sense!”

“That’s not it..... Min-san, don’t be so agitated! The Stun Shell will only cause a large bang and lights to throw the target off balance for a short period of time. It is purely used for threatening purpose, and does not have power to harm.....”

“Shut up! That isn’t the main problem, is it?”

Major’s head was pounded once again.

“Why do you always do such things.....”

Having only a towel on her after just finishing her bath, Min-san started a long lecture with such careless attire. I could only shrink on the corridor floorboard like a tortoise, secretly questioning Hiro-san behind me.

“Um..... Wasn’t it said that you guys don’t need to supervise today?”

“Alice did say so..... But we couldn’t just leave things like this! We were really worried.....”

Hiro-san answered in a small voice.

“So we kept you on surveillance through binoculars from the neighboring building.”

Well aren't your reactions quick— I couldn't help but think so, and at the same time totally understood the fact that I was completely untrusted.

Min-san's complaints were like an everlasting rain, but was suddenly interrupted by the voice of a girl.

“— Master, please stop just right there!”

Everyone looked at the front door almost at the same time.

With teddy bear pajamas and black hair almost reaching the floorboards floating along the wind— a girl stood outside the open door.

“..... Even you came? Seriously, what a commotion!”

Min-san glared at Alice while saying sarcastically.

“You really caused a huge stir. I could hear it even from the third floor. Narumi always forgets to get me, so I could only come down by myself. Master, sorry for intruding.”

Alice said while stepping into the corridor.

“What did you come for!”

“Master, please do not forget the case that you entrusted to us. I am here to conclude the case. I have only two things to ask the paralyzed stalker over there, and what happens after that is none of my concern.”

That moment, moans came from below Tetsu-senpai's butt, and we finally remembered the man's existence.

“..... Kimura Tomio, hmm, thirty..... thirty eight? It says that he's the head of a Development Department. Wow, what a bigshot!”

Hiro-san fished out an employer's ID from the tied up man's pocket and read out the information it contained.

“But I never heard of this company..... What does it do?”

Tetsu-senpai interrupted and asked.

“You don't know? They're a super famous lingerie manufacturer! This person

is a designer of lingerie. I've bought some from them as gifts for other people!"

I lowered my head to look at the middle-aged man that was currently squashed beneath Tetsu-senpai's butt. With his sleek face, healthy skin color and strangely child-like gaze, it was really hard to see that he was already thirty-eight.

This guy was obviously not the man in shades. Not only was their face shapes and build completely different, the man also had a suit that looked extremely expensive on him.

"P..... Please, c..... can you not inform my company of this matter?" Kimura Tomio-san pleaded in extreme subservience. "I have a reason for it as well....."

"A stalker saying that he has a reason.....?"

"I'm not a stalker! I..... I just want to look at how that female looks in private....."

Even though his back was pressured, causing his body to arc in agony, Kimura-san continued to stare at Min-san, who was still only in a towel, with an uncomfortably passionate gaze. Min-san stuck out her tongue in apparent disgust.

"You look like a stalker through and through!" Tetsu-senpai kept poking Kimura-san's head with sparse hair.

"You're just blaming us for your actions....." Major said.

"No! Actually, my aim was not to stalk her. As my objective was already completed, I swear that I will never do such a thing ever again! I swear! So please....."

"What kind of rubbish did you say just now! Wasn't you the one who stole my sarashi?"

"That was for a reason as well..... AHHHH! THAT HURTS! Nghh....."

"Do you want to die, stalker? Why don't you shut up already!"

"Tetsu, wait!"

Seeing that Tetsu-senpai was almost snapping Kimura-san's neck, Alice's

words caused him to loosen his hand. Alice walked to my side and squatted down, matching Kimura-san's gaze. It was as though the lewd gaze that contained a slight heat licked Alice who was wearing pajamas, making even me feel like landing a punch on his face. However, Alice seemed to be completely unconcerned, and calmly asked:

"One of the questions that I wish to ask you is regarding this. Why did you steal the sarashi? Tell me the truth according to its importance, and you might be dealt with in an appropriate manner."

Kimura-san's eyes widened, as though stupefied by Alice's arrogant tone that was in sharp contrast with her young appearance, and only spoke slowly after that:

"Because..... I-I wanted to see how that lady looks without a sarashi!"

..... What?

At the same time when everyone was stupefied, Kimura-san continued in a sincere tone:

"I am a designer, and I hope that you will treat me as a designer of lingerie who has artistic upbringing. Listen well, lingerie can support the delicate body of a female, while the delicate body of a female can highlight the finer points of lingerie— that is my belief. I hope for everyone to wear lingerie with an ideal design suitable for herself, that is my vision as well. I believe that nobody can be my rival in custom making lingerie. The common man might not believe it, but I will know the size and design that is most suitable for her as long as I see her body."

..... Knowing the size just by a look?

"You can see it? Even through clothes? Then do you know the size of my jeans?"

Hiro-san asked in curiously.

"But of course. It's 31-2 of London Slim, correct? However, the crotch area of the jeans is actually higher than you imagine, so you should buy a female version two sizes larger, or custom make it."

“Ngh!” Hiro-san was shocked into standing.

“This oji-san looks like the real thing!”

“Hurry up and tell us why you stole my sarashi!”

The impatient Min-san stepped on Kimura-san’s head.

“Just wrapping it with cloth will not do! That will cause the breast to change shape, an attire that goes against the nature of the human body, so it just won’t do. Ever since I saw you, who were in the midst of shopping, I kept feeling heartbroken as you treat your cup size bestowed upon you by God so carelessly! To release your beauty, I have understood that my mission is to design wonderful lingerie for you!”

Min-san stayed rooted with her mouth open.

This person..... is an idiot. Just an incurable idiot, actually coming over to steal just because of this.....

“Which means, I have just grasped the shape of your breasts. They are 70 below 95 above, G cup, and is known in our industry as a miraculous shape at the level of Taj Mahal, and is even the most precious of all mankind!”

Kimura-san stared at Min-san’s well-endowed breasts with his blood-laced eyes, and cried out as well.

“I have to get back to my company to design! P..... Please, let me go for this reason, and please don’t mention this to my company.....”

“..... I remember now. This guy is the idiotic customer who asked for my breast size before this.”

Min-san’s voice was so weak that it was like a sigh. I started to remember as well. So he was the idiot that time.....

“Were you behind the silent phones and Min-san’s photos?” Hiro-san asked gently.

“It..... It was done by me. But I really didn’t mean any harm, and just wanted her to know what she looked like without wearing proper lingerie.....”

My head hurt all of a sudden, please don’t say anything anymore.....

Under the extremely awkward atmosphere in the house, only Alice's voice was cool as usual.

"Then, another mystery is solved. Lastly, I have another thing to ask."

Squashed beneath Tetsu-senpai's butt, Kimura-san shook.

"Instead of saying that I am asking you, it is more like a confirmation. As to how you broke in the house....."

Tetsu-senpai, Major and I were all startled and raised our heads. Indeed, that was the most basic question of this whole matter.

"Wh..... What broke in? The front door wasn't locked at all."

"What are you talking about? I did lock the front door!"

When Min-san was about to roar, she was stopped by Alice's raised hand.

"Tell me the truth. You keep this house on surveillance almost every night, so you probably planned to peek from the windows when Min-san took a bath, whenever you had the chance, didn't you? However, sometimes, an even better opportunity arose— someone just opened the door and entered the house before your very eyes. Is that correct?"

Kimura-san's eyes widened in surprise.

"That..... That's right, but how..... how did you know?"

"Oi, what's wrong with this?"

Alice continued to coldly ignore Min-san's questions.

"Of course, you thought that the person was Master's cohabitant, didn't you? Thinking that he only returned late at night, and always carelessly forgot to lock the door. You thought to yourself that it was a chance of a lifetime, and thus snuck easily into the house through the front door, planning to peek directly outside the bathroom. In the end, it was just too hard to pull off, and thus you could only run away after stealing just the sarashi— and it happened thus not once, but twice."

"Why..... Why are you speaking as though you saw the whole process?"

Kimura-san's face paled.

"Hoho..... However, that person was not living with Master at all! In fact, he was an intruder like you."

"What?"

"He didn't forget to lock the door, but just left the door unlocked to leave a path open so that he could escape at any time."

"Oi! Alice, you explain things properly to me!" Min-san roared by my ears.
"You mean to say that that guy broke in even before this stalker?"

"That is indeed so. Isn't that right?"

Seeing Alice smile at him, Kimura-san could only nod frantically.

"Wait a minute, if so, is the other person still hiding in the house?"

Tetsu-senpai asked a scary question, but Alice shook her head while smiling.

"It is most probable that he already left when we caused such a large hustle. After all, that sly and thorough guy could evade all of y surveillance cameras, and even gave Hiro the slip as well."

"Was it the man in shades?"

I couldn't help but interject.

"Who else can it be?"

"Oi! Alice, I don't get what you are talking about at all. Speaking of which, who was that guy in shades anyway? Why did he keep leaving after eating a mouthful of ramen, and even snuck into my house?"

Alice stood up and immediately spoke after turning around to face Min-san:

"I heard that you were not willing to change the lock of your front door."

"..... Ah?"

"So that is the answer. Master, your choice was correct."

"What are you talking abo....."

Half through her words, Min-san froze with her eyes wide.

"Ah..... No, but..... How can this be? Even though he....."

Min-san muttered incoherently. She leant against the corridor wall with a look of disbelief, sliding onto the floor in a sitting position.

Alice bent down and gently patted Min-san's shoulders.

"Why do I feel like we don't understand what you guys are talking about at all.....? More importantly, how do we deal with this idiot?"

Tetsu-senpai spoke, while Kimura-san gave an odd shriek beneath him.

"I do not have anything else to ask him anymore. I shall leave him to you. It is up to you to decide, even if you wish to cook him for dinner."

"What do you mean cook him for dinner....."

"Please, I..... I'll pay you however much you want, so please don't call the police! Okay? I beg of you!"

Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major gathered with looks of disinterest and discussed for awhile. In the end, Hiro-san finally slapped his thigh forcefully.

"Oji-san, we have something to ask you....."

"What..... What is it?"

"You can know the size of their lingerie just by looking at their figure, right? What if..... I'm saying what if. What if that person was a girl with completely nonexistent breasts? Can you see that even so?"

"Of course I can! In truth, something like 'nonexistent breasts' is completely impossible. There only exists the common man who does not know how to admire the beauty of slightly smaller breasts. Wearing lingerie correctly can release the beauty of the breasts' shapes itself—"

"And if she is wearing pajamas, can you see it as well?"

"But of course."

Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai came to a consensus with just an exchanged look.

"Hmm..... Kimura-san, to be honest..... We have a request to ask of you, and if you are willing to comply, consider this matter forever buried in the depths of our hearts."

“Rea..... Really? I will do anything!”

“Well..... Anyway, it’s somewhat inconvenient over here, so let us talk outside!”

Carrying Kimura-san’s thin body’s left and right side respectively, Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai dragged him out of the front door just like that.

Only lukewarm air remained in the house.

“..... What are they going out to talk about?”

Alice’s head tilted in puzzlement, while I troubled over whether I should explain it to her..... Or would it be safer not to explain? But that wasn’t the main point.....

“Alice, I still can’t understand what happened.”

“As I thought so.”

“What as you thought so!”

“Let us have a look at the shop. I think the answer should already be placed there.”

A tumbler was placed on the table in the kitchen. Major was the first person to notice it.

“This is.....!”

Looking strangely excited, Major picked up the tumbler wrapped in a sunflower yellow cover. I did not have any impression of having seen that object before. There shouldn’t have been something like that tumbler in the kitchen just now.

“Isn’t this a tumbler for use of the American land army! Hmm..... And it isn’t a fake as well!”

You can actually see if it’s a fake? As expected of a military otaku..... Um, no..... The thing is, why did this thing appear here?

“Give me that!”

Min-san changed into her casual attire of a tank top and jeans, and after entering the kitchen along us, she snatched away the tumbler Major was holding after that.

She poured the contents of the tumbler into a bowl. Puffs of steam wafted from the amber liquid.

“..... Soup?”

Min-san raised the bowl to her lips with trembling hands and gulped down a mouthful.

“After five years of not tasting Hanada Masaru’s soup, how does it feel?” Alice asked while sitting on the stool with her hands around her knees.

..... Hanada Masaru?

After putting down the bowl, Min-san’s eyes seemed to be faintly glimmering with tears.

“..... Haha.....”

Unclear words poured from her lips.

“Indeed, this is the taste my old man cooked out..... Even so..... It isn’t as tasty as I imagined!”

Hanada Masaru— Min-san’s father.

That..... That guy in shades..... was Min-san’s own father.....? How can that be? Why?

“Master, that is just because you were hoping that your father cooked it better than you.”

“Shut up! Idiot!”

Min-san fell on the stood by Alice’s side.

“What the heck! Going missing all by himself, coming back just to send this thing to me? What was that guy thinking? Is he an idiot? What a joke!”

“Shouldn’t he have his own reason for doing so? Well, it is indeed hard to imagine. What follows are my own baseless guesses. He is probably accepting a vigorous special training, doing plastic surgery so that even his own daughter

couldn't recognize him, and even avoiding all of the cameras so that he wouldn't be filmed..... But doing all that just to come back here."

"..... Plastic surgery?"

I couldn't help but gasp.

First going missing, then going for plastic surgery? Wouldn't he have completely turned into another person then? What sort of reason would require him to do things to this extent? No matter how I thought, such a reason was just too unreasonable.

"It doesn't matter to me what reason he had!"

Min-san said in annoyance.

"Since he already came back, then just drop me a word! What was he being so secretive for? Coming back just to laugh at the ramen I make?"

Just then, I suddenly recalled Alice's words.

'I heard that you were not willing to change the lock of your front door.'

'So that is the answer. Master, your choice was correct.'

I finally understood what those words meant. Min-san was waiting for the other person who was holding the keys to come home, so that was why she was so firm in refusing to change the lock.

In these five years— she were always waiting.

Major picked up a spoon and secretly scooped up a mouthful of soup.

"Wow..... This really is the taste of Hanamaru's ramen from before!"

I picked up the bowl as well. Thick fragrance of the kelp and dried mackerel wafted from the soup, and was so clear that it allowed people to see the pattern of the base of the bowl. Containing a mouthful of soup in my mouth, a nostalgic taste spread out, giving me the feeling of watching a black and white movie.

However.....

I still thought that the current Min-san's soup was tastier.

I secretly looked at the side of Min-san's face. She had her head lowered, looking like she was crying, but she looked like she only had her eyes closed as well. I barely knew how her relationship with her father was in the past, and was thus unable to console her easily.

Even so—

I didn't think that this was the only reason her father came back. To tell her that the taste of her own food was better? A sample to let her remake the taste of the past? I think those weren't the reasons.

Although I didn't know what reason Hanada Masaru was willing to abandon the past him completely for, he was definitely once a prideful ramen chef like her daughter now. If so, he must have realized long ago that the Hanamaru ramen right now isn't worse off than it was in the past.

A chef definitely won't deceive his own sense of taste.

That is why.....

There should be something that we have not found.

I breathed in deeply and stood up.

“..... Narumi? What is it?”

I drove my usually dense brain on with all my power, Alice's voice almost lost at the back of my mind. When did Hanada Masaru sneak in the kitchen? After I stepped into the corridor when I noticed the stalker, he shouldn't have had the chance to go in. As the corridor was a straight line, there weren't corners for him to hide at all. If so, the only chance for him to sneak into the kitchen was when I switched off all the lights in the shop. When I was concentrating on listening to the footsteps of the stalker, Hanada Masaru was already in the kitchen.

I checked out the kitchen backdoor, and finally noticed that the door was not locked! That strengthened my belief that my assumptions were not wrong. He slipped away through here while there was a commotion in the corridor. If so, if he left anything here, he would definitely put it in this shop. Where would it be? Min-san and I had long since become extremely familiar with the shop, and

could navigate it freely even with our eyes closed. If there were anything unfamiliar at visible positions, we would definitely notice it immediately. But he probably didn't have time to hide the thing at hard to find places, and besides, hiding it at somewhere people can't find would be meaningless.

Where is it—

There was a spare stove on a table in a corner of the kitchen, while cardboard boxes with kelp stuffed inside was below it. I stopped before the cardboard box.

I pulled out the box— I was indeed right. The kelp that had been half used-up increased.

“..... Narumi? What in the world are you doing?”

I ignored Alice, who was approaching my side, and took out the bundled up kelp and stacked them on top of the table.

Finally, I saw what was hidden below.

“Min-san!”

Even I noticed that my voice was full of excitement. Min-san raised her head and looked at me with a gaze of confusion.

“This weren’t bought by you, were they? All of them are materials we never used before!”

Min-san stood up from the stool as though she was shocked, pushed aside Major and Alice who were sneaking peeks at the cardboard box, and then looked into the pile of kelp.

“..... Hah? Ah!”

Min-san’s voice sounded like old air squeezed out from the base of her body.

“..... It’s [Turtle’s Claw](#)! And there’s..... dried abalones? These scallops are really big! What type are they?”

The cardboard box containing kelp was stuffed full of rare ingredients. Min-san took them all out one by one to check them out and arranged them by her feet.

“That blasted guy, he never used any of these at all.....”

The addresses, numbers, company names and other information, probably names of vendors were written on the plastic bag stuffed full of various ingredients.

“His writing is terrible as usual, who knows what he’s writing!”

Min-san wiped her swollen eyes with the back of her hand, but laughed out loud.

“His personality is terrible as before, deliberately hiding it at a place like this, wanting us to discover them only after finishing up the leftover kelp.....” Alice smiled in slight sarcasm as well. So he planned to let Min-san continue on trying out using kelp to cook, being mistaken to the end?

“He was like that from before.” Min-san said. However, when she took out all the ingredients and saw the bottom of the box, she couldn’t say those annoyed words anymore. I could see that she was biting her lips, frantically trying not to let something flow out.

There was some untidy writing on the base written with marker pen—

‘Next time, let me try out the ice cream you made as well!’

*

In the end, my ‘Life Staying At Hanamaru Ramen’ continued for about a week. Although I said that I was staying there, actually I almost never slept at all, because I had to take turns taking care of the pot of soup on the stove along with Min-san. Each ingredient that Hanada Masaru-san sent had its own specialties and wasn’t easy to cook, and so we usually had to use a few days to do mistakes. The stench of the Turtle’s Claw was particularly hard to clear away, but those hardships weren’t in vain.

On the evening of the Wednesday next week, I finally returned to my house. “Who are you? Can you not break into other people’s house as you like? I’m calling the police!” Not only did my dear sister make a dig at me like so, she never even prepared dinner for me. Because of that, I could only fill my belly with cup noodles with tears that night.

No matter how you look at it, the whole incident was completely meaningless

to me, so that was the obvious outcome.

However, at least the souvenir I brought back especially— Hanamaru Ramen's new soup, was greatly praised by my sister, causing her lose all anger at me the following day.

“I went to the place you’re working part time at for ramen before.....”

She made a startling comment once more. I was completely unaware of such a fact. When did she go? Before I went there to work part time?

“The taste right now is much better!”

“But you can still taste that it’s from the shop, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can.”

It was a taste that Min-san came up with after five whole years. Even though its features had changed, the most important thing was never lost.

*

It would never be more perfect if the story ended just here. However, there was still more to this incident.

That day, after the club events at school ended, I went to Hanamaru Ramen somewhat earlier. As soon as I entered the kitchen, I saw Min-san looking at something in her hands.

“Hello, Min-san..... Is anything the matter?”

“Hmm? You came at just the right time.....”

Min-san shoved the thing in her hands in my face, scaring me into stepping back reflexively. It was what seemed to be a rather high class silk bra.

“..... Um..... This..... Well..... Where did you get it from? Why would something like a bra appear?”

“That’s what I just received from the mail. Since it was tightly wrapped up, I haven’t the faintest clue what it was! And when I unwrapped it, it was actually something like this. What in the world do I use this for?”

I took a closer look at it. The bra before my eyes was just so small that it wouldn't be able to bear Min-san's large breasts no matter how it tried to. To be exact, it was a delicate mini bra that was far smaller than the usual standards.

"I'll give this to you! That can probably be used as an eye mask, so it's really convenient if you're feeling sleepy in class!"

"My high school life will be totally ruined if I do that. Speaking of which, who sent this thing to you?"

"Who knows. It wasn't written on the package."

The mystery was only solved when I sent dan-dan noodles to Alice's office at night.

"Oh? It's you. Just at the right time."

Alice waved to me on the bed, a bra in her hands as well

"Tetsu and Hiro sent me this just now, saying that it's a gift. I only realized that it was actually such a thing when I opened it. What do you think this means? I am completely clueless."

There was a bra of a large size in Alice's hands, so large that it could contain a whole melon. I used up all my energy just trying to contain my sigh.

"I have no use for something like this. Let it be a present for you! You can use it as a waist bag."

Was it Kimura Tomio or Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai who made a mistake with the contents of the parcels, I wonder? I don't know, and don't want to know. In the end, the only one who could correct this mistake was only me, but I really didn't have the energy for it.

Due to the above reasons, a pair of high class brassieres that are like the ratio of Venus and Mercury were slumbering in my wardrobe.

And when my sister noticed the two bras after that, there was a huge commotion as well. However, that would be a story for another time.

The Detective and the Love Professor

Actually, there were times where I was curious as to how old Alice was. I heard that she never attended elementary school, but I had never heard about her not attending middle school, so I guess she should be around twelve or so. She was always saying all sorts of big stuff with a haughty attitude, stunning me, so maybe that was the reason why I never thought of her to be that old. Also, with those ridiculously poorly eating habits and undeveloped body, she might not be as young as she appeared? In any case, she didn't seem to be older than me.

Alice's the girl who lived in the room above the ramen shop I worked at. The Room 308 had a stupid 'NEET Detective Agency' signboard, and every day, she was holed up alone in the room. Alice called herself the NEET detective, but she was always dressed in pajamas, sitting on the bed, facing the keyboard; in fact, she was merely in charge of hacking passwords on the internet. She hardly had a tan, didn't exercise, and had an unbelievably small appetite; her limbs were astonishingly white and thin.

I didn't know the environment Alice grew up in, and I didn't know her real name, family and age; even I found that part unbelievable. I get tired whenever I was around Alice, due to various factors, so I didn't have the time to ask personal information like her name and age, things that I should logically know.

Despite this, there were times where I would be curious about them. Like this one time,

On a certain evening in the beginning of May, I, working at 'Ramen Hanamaru', entered the shop, and was ordered by the lady boss Min-san to deliver a takeout to Alice.

"It's Chinese don. She doesn't like rice, so if she doesn't eat, tie her up and stuff it into her mouth."

Min-san's dressed as a fighter, the sarashi wrapped around her, and a tank top over it, her hair tied in a ponytail; she might be acting as Alice's mother, but she often said some overbearing things. It's no wonder, for if she did not force Alice to eat, the latter would spend the rest of her days living on Dr. Pepper. I didn't know when it started, but the job to get Alice eating had become a daily routine for me.

Min-san doused soup on the rice that was the size of a baby's fist, and I put the bowl of mini Chinese don on a tray, carrying it to the detective agency on the 3rd floor.

"Alice, I'm going in. It's time to eat."

The office's a one room flat, and there was a little corridor from the entrance. The bedroom acted as an unpleasant server room, three walls were buried behind various equipment. The strong cold winds were blown downwards, and on this day, Alice was sprawled on the bed, typing at the keyboard, her long black impressive hair like a plant growing in the shadows, and the bare slender legs beneath the pajamas suddenly reached towards me just when I was about to enter, and I turned my face aside. "...Put on some clothes before you work."

"I'm busy now. Electronic signals pass through the circuits at lightspeed, and this is a absolute law in the universe. Ordinary values will not put on my clothes for me."

Alice said without giving me a glance. A torrential downpour of keyboard tapping could be heard along with the words.

"No, won't you catch a cold if you don't put on socks?"

A pile of previously used pajamas was on the floor at the end of the bed, and the brand new white knee socks were taken out and tossed aside. This room filled with electronics had air conditioning on the entire time, so it was really cold. Even if her tolerance to the temperature was inhuman, she should be feeling cold since she's barefoot, right? Alice actually said this to me at this moment, "Put the socks on me. My hands aren't available."

"Ehhh? Me?"

"Who else is around? Don't ask the obvious."

"No, but."

"Even if I do explain, I think you won't understand. Time is of the essence when I hack in while the system is undergoing maintenance. Miss by a second, and the fate will differ. You aren't telling me to wear my socks and have me verbally command you on how to operate? Considering the work efficiency, you should know this isn't possible!"

Nobody thinks that, okay. I'm telling you to pause and wear your socks.

"Narumi, hurry up."

Alice's eyes never left the monitor as she kept kicking her legs to prompt me. I sighed, hesitated for a long while, picked up the socks, and climbed onto the bed.

Good thing she was wearing shorts. That made me relieved.

Objectively looking however, this really isn't good. So I put the socks on Alice without touching her skin, somehow. If there just so happened to be someone entering the room while I was putting her socks on, I would have been punched all the way to India.

"And wash my clothes."

Once she's finally done with dress up, Alice ordered me as she continued to tap at the keyboard. I lowered my head, and could vaguely see some frills under the pile of pajamas, probably underwear or camisole. I'm a guy after all, doesn't she have a sense of shame or something...?



So on that day, I dumped the clothes into the washing machine of the office, thinking about something. I guess she never thought of the opposite sex as she's still a kid. No, Alice never thought of the concept of a boy because it's Alice we're talking about here. Likewise, I never really thought of her like that, I guess?

"What? Why are you looking at me? You really like watching others eat. I'm too lazy to correct that blatant habit of yours."

"Eh...ah, no, sorry."

Alice was seated on the bed, holding a spoonful of the Chinese don that cooled off. (but had no intention to put into her mouth) I stared blankly at her, not realizing this at all.

"And I ordered for Chinese don without rice..."

Alice continued to grumble away, not willing to eat a mouthful, so I could only take out a can of Dr. Pepper and hand it to her. I guess it's not that farfetched to say that half of Alice's body was nurtured through this carbonic drink.

Alice pulled the ring, and was suddenly giving a pained look as she raised the can up high, intending to pour it onto the rice. Hold it right there! That's desecrating 4000 years of Chinese history!

Luckily, Alice put away with those thoughts before that, and I heaved a sigh. I turned my back on Alice, who was by the bedside, and started pondering.

Alice's a NEET, one who never left the house, but she was surrounded by guys of all kinds—the ex-boxed Tetsu-senpai, college military nerd Major, gigolo Hiro, and the young yakuza gang leader Yondaime.

Hm, all of them are older than me, and always enter this room at well, so they're already used to Alice's antics—I guess that's why they never thought of her as a dating partner? These NEETs...why are they so careless about this?

"It's all because of you."

The sudden voice from behind caused me to turn around in shock. Alice was grimacing bitterly. Eh, me? Eh, what, what did I do?

“It’s because you’re watching me eat nowadays that Master’s been ignoring my orders, always adding noodles, rice, causing trouble for me!”

Alice continued with tears in her eyes,

“Ah...that.”

I dropped my shoulders hard.

“What’s with the gaudy look? You’re acting stranger than usual today.”

“Shut up.”

Once she cooled down, she realized she was embarrassed, and could only retort haughtily. Goodness, I was really off on that day. Maybe it was because I had anticipated what was going to happen, I guess?

*

I took the empty bowl and tray back to ‘Hanamaru’, which had began operations for the day. There were already people at the seats of the cramped counter soon after business started; that was a rare sigh.

“—So I guess I had to close the shop.”

“Since you’re closed for the time being, go on a trip! Bring your mom along!”

“I don’t have that money! Eh, this is troublesome.”

Conversing with Min-san across the counter was a young man. He was probably of the same age as her, about 25, 26. His energetic, bearded face gave a wild impression. I would guess he’s her acquaintance.

I entered the kitchen from the back door, “welcome”, nodded towards him, and put on the apron.

“Uh, huh? You hired a new part-timer? A boy this time? Hello there.”

This man before me showed a hearty smile, so hearty he was unlike those loitering around ‘Hanamaru’, and that surprised me.

“Hello.” I responded politely, and glanced aside at Min-san.

“He’s my classmate in high school, Tomozou. What’s your family name again?”

I forgot after calling you Tomozou, Tomozou all the time.”

“How cruel of you. Okabayashi. Same as the shop name.”

“Ah, I see.”

I stared blankly at Min-san, who was exchanging looks and smiling with Tomozou-san. Min-san during high school? I couldn’t imagine...no, even if Min-san did have her youthful teenage time, it’s just...woah! I got a lot of questions to ask, what kind of girl was she like during high school? Did she have a sarashi wrapped around her chest since then? “Ow!” I got punched in the back of the head, and squatted due to the pain.

“What was that about!?”

“You’re thinking about something stupid again, so I’ll just beat you up.” Min-san responded with such harsh words. But well, she’s right.

“You know the Okabayashi Sundries? It’s a little hostel, near the high school you’re at. He’s the boss there. A shoddy little shop, but it has all kinds of imported alcohol. Back in high school, I was always drinking what’s stolen from his shop.

No, erm, shouldn’t you be at least twenty?

“My dead dad always went to places like USA all the time! It’s troublesome to keep importing for personal use, but I did inherit this business. The most expensive ones always end up finished by me though.”

Tomozou-san explained with apprehension. I see, so this hearty attitude’s due to his non-NEET background, huh?

“Troublesome? I see that you’re enjoying yourself there, aren’t you? This guy’s always boasting about his knowledge on booze all the time, even called the booze professor. Once we talk about booze, there’s no stopping him.”

Min-san interjected, and Tomozou-san grimaced.

“If you want to try your first wine in life, come look for me! I’ll pick a strong one for you, not so much that you’ll die, but that you’ll understand how terrifying it is.” The booze professor kindly told me, “Did Hanada get your drunk before? She’s bad at holding her liquor, so be careful.”

Hanada, so I momentarily wondered who it was. I guess it's Min-san's name?

"Tomozou, one more word and I'll beat you up. Your shop's doomed if they find out you're selling booze to underaged kids. Anyway, your shop's about to close, isn't it?"

You're saying that...wait. Close down?

"Ah, yes."

Tomozou-san gave a wry expression, scratching his head.

"There's a supermarket opening next door. Some strange things happened recently, so I had to close for the time being."

"—Something weird happened?"

"Something strange—" I asked, only for the back door to the left of the kitchen to open suddenly. Steam floated outside, lifting the long black hair.

"Tomozou, you could have said you were coming! Why didn't you discuss such an urgent matter with me? Didn't I say I'll do anything as long as it's for you? Don't you trust me?"

"What! Even Yuuko was told...?"

I could hear Tomozou-san grumbling as I stared blankly at Alice. It was the first time I saw Alice rush downstairs for a customer, and someone actually addressing her by her given name. Also, erm, anything for you...what's with that? Anyway, I was so shocked that I turned around, momentarily rooted, only to recover when Min-san hit me in the back of the head.

*

The following day, I took a detour to Okabayashi Sundries to have a look.

So I had seen this shop often, and it was a five minute distance from the back door of my high school. It sells beer, cold drinks, miso, sauces and other condiments, a little, old-school merchant shop. While I had rode past it a few times, high school students would never enter this shop, and the signboard was long faded due to the sun, so I had no impression on the shop's name at all.

Next to the Okabayashi Sundries was the new supermarket, 'Ricomart', the banners at the door promoting its special prices fluttering around, with lots of cars at the parking lots nearby. I was thinking that such a strong competitor wasn't a good thing, but I parked my bicycle at the parking lots of the supermart opposite.

Okabayashi Sundries just so happened to be located at the supermart deep inside. I tapped at the glass door with the 'closed' sign, and heard some movements before the door opened.

"Righto...huh, isn't this Narumi?"

Appearing at the door was not Tomozou-san.

"Senpai? What are you doing here?"

"Testing the goods." Tetsu-senpai said as he pointed at a dark corner of the shop. Soon after, I saw Tomozou-san excite with an apron wrapped around his waist.

"You're not exactly helping out when you're dropping by uninvited, aren't you? Just trying to steal a drink while I'm not around?" Tomozou-san grinned as he tapped at Tetsu-senpai's shoulder.

Tetsu-senpai once studied at my high school before dropping out, and he's a pachinko player. While Tomozou-san's pretty sturdy looking, he does look a little weaker when standing side by side. As to be expected of a former boxer, I guess; those firm muscles are really different from ordinary people.

"You know Tomozou-san too, senpai?"

"Yeah. He's the master who taught me how to drink." So senpai responded. Aren't you supposed to be 19?

"Did Yuuko ask you to come over?"

Tomozou-san asked, and I hurried shook my head. Actually, I was curious about Alice's attitude, and wanted to know what kind of person Tomozou-san was, but I really couldn't mention this reason.

"I decided to drop by. I wanted to figure out what's going on here..."

"Oh, come on in."

The shop, with air conditioning blaring, felt extremely cooling, while the cupboards and fridges were covered with cloth, making them seem lonely. There were Japanese wines, fruit-based wines, whiskeys and all kinds of various wines lined neatly in rows.

“Oh? Another customer?”

A middle-aged lady poked her head out from the noren at the counter, and once she noticed me, she immediately turned around, entered the house, and soon returned with three sets of cups and plates.

“My apologies, this shop will be closed if left unmaintained, yet you came all the way here...”

The lady served three cups of Oolong tea on the counter, and Tomozou-san took one to drink, yapping unhappily, “And that’s why we can’t leave this be! Alright, mom, enough with that. Go do the accounts.”

Yes yes, so the old lady said as she returned inside. So she’s Tomozou-san’s mother?

“Only the two of you in this shop?”

I asked Tomozou-san, trying to do some detective work. I did remember he said that his father passed away.

“Yeah. But I’ve always been out delivering stocks, and mom can’t stay in the shop to keep watch, so we don’t know when that happened.”

Tomozou-san looked really grim as he looked towards the wine lined on the floor.

According to Tomozou-san, it was first discovered by an old customer who would order crates of Japanese wine every month.

“I heard that he assumed the color and taste was different without drinking it. As a seller of wine, it’s really a humiliation for me to not notice it.”

It seemed something black (probably soy sauce) was added in. The bottle’s brown, and it was to be expected that he could not tell from the appearance.

“How did the culprit mix it in?”

“Opened the cap and poured it in. Look.”

Tetsu-senpai picked up a bottle by his feet, and handed it over. The bottleneck was made of a normal, thin metal, and there was a little round hole at the bottom, such that it would be pried out upon squeezing it, allowing it to turn.

“...Ah, was it held down by duct tape?”

It was a simple method. After tightening the opened cap, a quick adhesive was then added at the seal. It could be discovered on a closer look.

Surely it was the sign of someone destroying it.

“This is a terrible thing to do to such wonderful wine. I found five bottles like this.”

Tomozou-san said with a dejected look. I see. So that’s why he closed down, and even Tetsu-senpai dropped by to test the goods?

“Do we call the cops—”

But before I could finish my words, Tomozou-san and Tetsu-senpai shook their heads in unison.

If possible, try not to let the police know. Even I understood this situation immediately. If matters got out of hand, the shop’s reputation would also be affected.

But who exactly would do such a thing, for what reason? If it was just a prank, that would be too much effort, wouldn’t it?

“Any threatening letter received or anything?”

Tomozou-san gave a wry smile, shaking his head,

“Why threaten this poor wine merchant? No good comes out of this. Seriously, I don’t understand why this happened.”

While the three of us went silent, the shrill, rock n’ roll styled guitar roll suddenly blared in the dim shop. I flusteredly removed the cellphone from my pocket. The ‘Colorado Bulldog’ ringtone clearly indicated that the caller was

Alice.

“You’re done with school today, right? Tetsu should be at the scene now, so before dropping by the office—”

“Ah, yeah. I’m at Okabayashi Sundries.”

I cut off the NEET detective, and she, on the other end of the phone call, was momentarily left speechless.

“...It’s rare to see you so sharp this time. Did something happen?”

“No, it’s nothing...” I tried to play dumb, “Anyway, I heard the details from Tomozou-san.”

I narrated to Alice about how the wine was tampered.

“Hm...I understand. Anyway, bring one of the tampered bottles back; I want to have a look. Also, I called Major and Hiro to come over, so tell Tomozou that.”

“Hey, wait, Yuuko. I don’t remember asking you for anything. Don’t escalate matters this time. This is our shop’s issue!”

Tomozou-san growled as he approached my phone.

“Are your problems not mine as well!?”

Alice was not going to back now as she yelled back, as I instinctively moved the cellphone away from my ears.

“You’re trying not to pretend how much I value you? If it’s just to protect your shop, you won’t have to submit a request to me.”

She hung up, and I stared blankly at Tomozou-san’s face for quite a while.

“...She’s the same as before.”

“Well, since we got nothing to do, leave it to us. We won’t charge you for this Tomozou-san. Don’t mind.”

“No, it’s not about the money.”

“Just give me a bottle of Hennessy as reward.”

“I’m not giving you one drop at all, so go back now.”

I casually overheard their conversation, still unable to believe what Alice had

just said. She said that...how much did she value Tomozou-san?

“...mi? Hey! Narumi!”

Tetsu-senpai slapped me on the face, getting me to recover.

“Eh? Ah! Wh-what?” I didn’t know why I was this stunned myself.

“What are you spacing out for? Here, it’s the wine with other stuff inside. Didn’t Alice tell you to bring it to her? She’s gonna be angry if you keep dilly dallying here.”

Senpai stuffed the brown bottle into my hands, and shoved me out of the doors.

“I’ll continue to inspect the goods here.”

“...Ah, okay.”

“What? You’re acting weird today, Narumi? You alright? Did the NEET virus finally get to you.”

“No, it’s fine, I’m completely fine.”

What’s the relationship between Alice and Tomozou-san? I swallowed this question back in. It’s really hard to ask Tetsu-senpai about this.

But I really should have asked at this point. It would have made the ending a little better.

As I was too dumbfounded, I did not notice the white foreign car while exiting the parking lots of the supermarket, and so the front wheel clipped the bumper, causing me to tumble hard.

“—Are you alright?”

A woman with long hair opened the door, and poked her head out of the door. I had fallen on my backside, and kept nodding away.

The woman parked her car at the outer end of the parking lots, and hurried out of the car. She was dressed in a white one piece suit, with a beige cardigan over her. She’s a posh, pretty lady.

“Are you hurt? Fine?”

“Yeah, I’m alright. Really sorry about that.”

I suddenly remembered the wine bottle on me, and patted my bag. Good thing it wasn’t broken.”

“Thank goodness...” The woman let out a sigh.

“Sorry for being careless...” I lowered my head repeatedly, and got onto the bicycle again.

I was about to cross the road, and casually turned back to look, only to be more confused.

“Hello, is Tomo-kun in?”

The young lady who was driving knocked on the door of Okabayashi...who’s she? Tomozou-san’s friend?

*

After having a whiff of the Japanese wine, Ugh, Alice stuck her tongue out, and immediately corked the bottle, returning it to me.

“It is said that humans began brewing wine once they discovered cereal, but I do find that incomprehensible. Why would people think of drinking such things?”

The girl saying such things was surrounded by walls of stacked Dr Pepper, and thus, her words were not convincing in the slightest.

“Anyone will have the urge to get drunk once in a while...”

I tightened the cap, saying pretentiously,

“Oh? It does sound like you seem very experienced?”

Alice draped her blanket on her shoulders, giving a mischievous smile, and I could only look aside awkwardly.

“I guess. Like when my mind’s in a mess.”

“Will it not mess with your mind further?”

"Well...I forgot if it was in 'The Little Prince' or something, but drunkards drink to forget all that's embarrassing to them."

"What's embarrassing?"

"Like getting drunk, for one."

Alice laughed out loud, her long hair sprawled upon the bed.

"That is amazing. Is life not like this?"

She said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. Was it that funny? As I stood amidst the cold wind blowing his, I gradually felt that my messy thoughts were meaningless.

"I really do what to see a drunkard fall into that trail of thoughts as a bystander. While that is a precious bottle, you can finish it yourself, Narumi."

"I'm not." And anyway, isn't there supposed to be soy sauce mixed inside or something? "And, you can't be saying such things to other people so carelessly. Even I don't know what I'll do if I get drunk, you know?"

"Then give one example. What will you do?"

This one here actually asked with a bemused look,

"No, it's nothing."

Why ask me with such a serious look!? I'll end up thinking about all kinds of this here!

"It's fine. No matter how ugly you may become, I will record it all down with this highly potent digital camera, and upload it into the vast network to be promoted as your digital history."

"Please stop."

I sighed, and put the bottle back into the fridge. It really did seem that lots of things did not matter.

"Anyway, are we sure the Japanese wine isn't the only thing touched?"

"Eh? Ah, ah, well, no."

Alice suddenly reverted back to the topic, and I was a little giddy,

“Not just the Japanese wine. The whiskey and rum have been tampered with.”

“Hm. That eliminates the possibility of the imports being tampered en masse. Looks like they were tampered after they entered the shop.”

I see. It seemed the wine Okabayashi Sundries imported would vary based on type. If the Japanese and Western wines were both tempered, it’s easy to think that they were tampered after entering the shop.

“But...what’s the purpose of doing this here?”

“Who knows? It’s hard to tell before we analyse what was mixed into the wine? If it’s not to harm the drinker, it is to harm something else.”

“...The reputation of the shop?”

“This is currently the only possibility I can think of, and also a chance of the culprit to do this again. We got to get Major involved again.

Like Tetsu-senpai, Major’s one of Alice’s collaborators, an expert at taking illegal photos, eavesdropping, and trespassing, so naturally, he’s capable of self-defense. Looks like we need him to contribute again.

As usual, there’s a drop in what I can do now.

“It’s unforgivable to do anything to Tomozou-san’s shop. I’ll give it my all to find the culprit”

Alice seemed really riled up. Goodness. It’s for Tomozou-san—right?

In other words, she had special feelings—for Tomozou-san, right? Well, it’s nothing strange, since Alice’s a girl after all...

Feeling really sulky, I exited the office.

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It was the following morning, and Golden Week was in its latter part. I had to drop by school to take care of the flower garden (it might sound unlikely, but I’m a member of the gardening club after all). Once I left, I dropped by Okabayashi Sundries again.

The opposing (?) shop ‘Ricomart’ remained rife with business, and the parking lots were filled, so much so that some vehicles were parked before Okabayashi Sundries...huh? Didn’t I see this white foreign car before?

Right when I was about to approach the glass door and knock on it, I heard a sharp voice of a lady, “...Why didn’t you tell me? Y-you asked those children to help you out?”

“I didn’t!” Tomozou-san’s voice followed, “And this is my family issue, nothing to do with you.”

“You always say this! Nothing to do with me, all the time! Whatever, I get it.”

I was wondering if I should drop by at a later time, but the glass door before my eyes opened abruptly, and a woman stormed out, “Keep on acting tough! I’m not going to help you when it’s too late!” She stated with a huff, not noticing me, and not bothering to evade, “Kya!”

The woman knocked me down from the front, and a cloud of dust wiped out, as all I saw was stars floating around.

“...So-sorry, are you alright?”

“Eh, ah, yes...”

Before I could finish, I could taste iron in my mouth. Guess I had a cut somewhere. The woman quickly got up, dusted off her short skirt, and held me by the arm, pulling me up.

“...Oh, you’re from yesterday.”

“Ah.”

She was the woman who was driving and collided into me at the parking lots. It’s the second time we crashed. Both of us averted our eyes in embarrassment.

“What are you doing?” Tomozou-san poked his head out from the door, “Nothing!” and the lady replied, running back to her car parked by the road.

“Ahh, looks like you saw something embarrassing.” Tomozou-san scratched his head in frustration.

“How is it possible for a nice princess to be dating my son ehre...?”

We were at the counter inside the dim shop. Aunty served me malt tea as she noted,

“Goodness, if you don’t treat her well, she’s going to run away. How did you end up like your father here?”

“Shut up.”

“The only one worried about you would be that lady, isn’t it? Think about her, and just leave this shop already. It’s weird to say this...but you can use this chance to close shop and marry her.”

“That’s nonsense. We aren’t done paying the loans.”

“Besides, the neighbour wants to convert this place into a parking lot, so you should just sell the shop...”

“Alright, just drop this matter.”

“Goodness, you should seriously think this through!” The old lady raised her voice.

“Shut up. I’m thinking now, no?”

“I’m saying you should hear out what a woman is suggesting! You’re always deciding things on your own, like a certain someone.”

“In that case, don’t come to this shop anymore, mom! Go retire and enjoy your tea. I’ll handle everything in the shop alone.”

“That isn’t what I’m saying! You should have discussed this through with Yumi-chan—”

I shrank my neck back as I overheard this conversation happening before me. It seemed aunty finally remembered my existence as she glanced aside at me, closed her mouth, coughed lightly, and averted her eyes, quickly darting into the house deep behind the right side of the counter.

Business, marriage...I guess the life and work of ordinary people isn’t easy either.

“...Is that person just now your girlfriend, Tomozou-san?” I whispered.

“Yumi? Ah, hm, well, sorta.” Tomozou-san seemed to have difficulty in saying this as he answered. I see...so he has a girlfriend? I guess Alice’s feelings...yep, in other words, just a one-sided crush? I see...but why am I sighing in relief? I was taken aback by my own feelings, and took up the malt tea, drinking it.

“What’s it about selling the land?”

“The shop next door feel that the parking lots aren’t enough. There was an old geezer, probably the shop owner or something, asking us before they began work...”

I began to think. The location for this shop is a hinderance (for Ricomart), and if the place can be converted into parking lots, the space will be much spacious. I guessed they started work after all the surrounding land was bought and scrapped.

In that case, we got one party that can directly benefit once this shop closes down. But would they really tamper with the wine bottles for such reasons?

“Anyway, thinking about this is getting me all the more angry...I’m selling wine not for business, but that I like them, and want to share them...”

“Too bad the security of this shop is as non-existent as the Italian army.”

A voice suddenly popped up, causing Tomozou-san and I to nearly jolt in surprise.

“—Major? Where did you come from?”

Tomozou-san exclaimed. A diminutive figure dressed in the camouflage colors of the People’s Liberation Army, along with a safety helmet, appeared between us without us knowing.”

“I pried the back door open and enter, no more than 5 seconds even. The thieves on this world are too arrogant and ruthless. You really lack a sense of security.”

Thieves like you?

“Well, since Vice-Admiral Fujishima is here, help out. I’m going to install surveillance cameras and strength the locks.”

Major’s the only one who would call me ‘Vice Admiral Fujishima’. He

rummaged for various parts from his bag, grinning as he placed the items on the table, one by one. He's similar to an elementary schooler in height, and was born a babyface, but he's really a college student.

"Hey, Major, wait! Aren't these equipment pricey or something? I don't have that much money on hand."

"Don't worry, Tomozou-san, I will not take a single Perica [3] from you, all these will be on Alice's tab. This time, I prepared a highly unnecessarily potent surveillance system that is exceptionally practical, to be tested while using it. It's of this size, but very capable of detection within 1000 meters, and even lets you know if it's Osugi or Peeko [4]."

Even I can't distinguish between them from 3 meters out. Wait, that's not the problem. Alice is paying? This is a sacrifice worth crying over.

"It really does seem like the real deal."

So we began to install the surveillance cameras, while aunty kept watch worriedly inside the house. There's a corridor from the back of the counter, leading all the way to the storage, and on the left side, there's a back door for goods movement. This would be the most probable point of entry, so we had a surveillance camera installed at the door frame, another three right outside the main door of the shop, and one right above the shop so that everywhere could be seen.

Major then opened a notebook PC, happily checking if all the surveillance cameras were working normally; Tomozou-san, whose shop had stuff installed everywhere, was looking displeased.

"Just in case, I want to install one more in the warehouse..."

Major stood at the end of the corridor, pushing the storage door aside as he poked his head to look inside the dark room.

"It's really dark."

"Hm? No lights?"

"There are, just that we normally don't switch them on. Actually, we can't have lights around when storing wine."

Heh. Now that he mentioned it, wines are typically stored in the cellar. So other forms of alcohol need to be stored in dark places?

“Eh, but to prevent theft—”

“No problems here. There aren’t any other entrances here.”

Tomozou-san switched on the lights, and led Major and me in.

The lights of the store were rather dim, and the air was dry and cool, probably due to the air conditioning. The undecorated metal racks were lined up, each level filled with various kinds of alcohol. Even so, not all could be stored, as there were cardboard boxes and plastic baskets laid out all over the floor.

Major scanned the storeroom, but could not find a single window. There was a duct on the ceiling, but it was impossible to climb in from there.

Positioned at the innerside of the shelves were wines, and other various goods like soy sauces, miso, and salad dressings, but I noticed something really intriguing over there.

There was something short, plump and round at the left side of the bottom shelf. I bent down to look, and found myself staring at a pair of round eyes, causing me to nearly tumble over in shock.

It’s about the size of two hands clasped together, something made of ceramic. Komainu—I guess?

“That’s not a Komainu, it’s a Shisa.” Tomozou-san noted, “This is something my dad left me. It was covered in dust on the shelves, and I just found this recently.”

After hearing that, I again stared at that strange, humorous face. A Shisa should be a guardian beast from Okinawa, right? I remember it’s similar to a Komainu, comes in a pair too, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s a limited edition though, since so few of them are made...dad tried finding them through various means, and seemed to have gotten one; he died before he could find another one. So now it’s my turn to look for it...”

Tomozou-san kneeled down, and took a plastic wrapper to cover it.

“Good thing this one here’s safe. I’m still hoping to find the other one by the Sunday two weeks later.”

The Sunday two weeks later? May 13th...some special day?

“It’s a secret.” But Tomozou-san noted as he stood up. Major climbed up the shelves, checking with a serious look to see if the vents could be entered, but Tomozou-san dragged him out, nudged me out of the storage, and switched off the lights.

While Major’s promoting and boasting about how capable his cameras were, I left him at the shop. Go on for the rest of your life.

I went to the back of the shop for my bicycle that was parked there, and a blue one-piece dress entered my sights. It’s the woman from before. She scurried off from the back door, and entered the white car parked by the roadside—the car that was parked there the entire time. What’s with her? Didn’t she head back?

The woman, seated at the driver seat, seemed to have noticed me too. She hurriedly started the engine and left, disappearing soon after.

...Or so I thought, yet she returned. What’s with her? The car was parked right before this dumbfounded me, and the window opened.

“Eh, e-erm...sorry, I thought...”

The woman poked her head out, looking back and forth between me and the rearview mirror as she spoke.

“Are you, Tomo-kun’s underclassman?”

“N-no?”

“Erm, then, well, maybe, the Ramen shop...”

“Ah, yes, that’s right.”

I’m one of those kids who’s up to something you don’t know , those you mentioned just now. But I could not bring myself to say so.

The woman nervously held the steering wheel, bit her lower lip, and struggled

a bit, before she finally lifted her head.

“Eh, I’m really sorry, but may I have some of your time?”

...Ehhh?

It was the first time in my life that I entered a café with a woman. We were led to the innermost seats of the shop. Once the waitress left, the woman handed me a namecard.

Wakui Food Corporation Pte Ltd, Public Relations

Wakui

I heard of this company name. There’s a lot of their adverts aired on TV.

“Hm? Your last name...”

“Ah, yes, father’s the chairman.”

I looked back and forth between the namecard and Wakui Yumi-san’s face. So she’s the princess to the chairman? It’s the first time I saw one. Ah, I see. Hmm, she does have the princess vibe.

“...Whaaat is it?”

“Ehh, no, nothing...”

Yumi-san tilted her head in confusion, but she chose to continue with what we were discussing.

It was about three years since Tomozou-san and her were dating. Back then, Wakui Food Corporation was just a small level sundries wholesale distributor, and Okabayashi Sundries already had business dealings with them. It was said that while companies would purchase food products from Wakui Corporation, they would never purchase the alcohol products. Thus, when the next head of Okabayashi Sundries took over, Yumi-san, who was still working at the shop, went over to coax him, hoping and they would purchase some alcohol products.

“That was the first time I met Tomozou. He said that all the wine products we imported were terrible, and that he’ll never buy some, so we had a tiff.”

That man’s uncompromising when it comes to wines, huh?

“And after that, lots of things happened, and then we started dating.”

Ehhhh?

“...Erm, sorry. I don’t know how it all led to that.”

“I guess. I myself don’t understand very well why am I with him. Also, we’re always quarrelling, every day, even until now.” Yumi-san chuckled. Seriously, are these two actually dating? Anyway, Tomozou-san’s mom did say she hoped for them to get married or something, so I guess they’re close enough to be at that stage, huh?

But Yumi-san showed a wry smile upon hearing these words.

“We did quarrel over that matter a few times. I was always prepared to take over Wakui...but Tomo-kun didn’t want to. He said he still had his shop.”

So she hoped to marry and have him take over? Ahh, so I guess getting married will basically meant closing shop for him...

“Also, recently, I have been feeling uneasy.”

The waitress just so happened to serve tea and coffee, interrupting Yumi-san’s words. The latter’s long eyebrows drooped, her eyes fixated upon the amber fluid in the filled cup. As for me, I took a sip of black coffee, with no sugar.

Why would I be discussing such a thing with a woman I had just met for the first time...?

“So, I do have some things to ask.”

Yumi-san lifted her head, earnestly looking at me.

“It is about the people gathered at the ramen shop Tomo-kun always shows up at. How are they like?”

What is she asking?

“Tomo-kun wouldn’t tell me anything. So, I have to ask.”

“Erm...”

If we’re talking about those people there, that’ll probably be the ex-boxer and pachinko expert Tetsu-senpai, the military otaku Major, and the gigolo Hiro. Also, there’s the young yakuza boss Yondaime who would drop by from time to time. All these guys are NEETs, not in education, and not in employment.

“...Are they all men?” Yumi-san looked really disturbed as she continued to press on.

Ah, I see. So she’s worried about that? Seriously, there’s nothing much to worry about—so I thought, but I suddenly thought of someone else.

“Well, it’s not like there aren’t women...”

Yumi-san’s face changed. Uh oh, how could I have told her that?

“How’s she like?”

“Well...she’s a NEET detective, always surfing the internet in her pajamas?”

Yumi-san’s mouth was agape. It’s a normal reaction.

However, after everything happened, I reflected on my actions, and could only say that I was being paranoid. The one lady at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’, the one who would be suspicious— One would not be thinking of Alice, but Min-san instead, right?

The reason why I first thought of Alice was because she showed much affection to Tomozou-san several times before me. It’s scary to think too much into this.

After exiting the café, we bade farewell to each other.

“I’m really sorry for discussing such strange things to you during our first encounter.”

Yumi-san seemed really sorry as she said this, while I merely shook my head. I’m probably destined for such a fate in life, I guess? I’m like a trash bin at a park. Anyone I meet the first time, they will voice out to me like rubbish.

“Please do not tell Tomo-kun what we just talked about.”

Saying that, Yumi-san got into the car.

I watched the white cardrive down the road, towards the station, and walked off in the opposite direction.

Things were really getting complicated. The sense of helplessness piling up within me got increasingly dire, but why? I really couldn't bring myself to deal with this case. No, I should say this goes for every case, but this time, it's so serious that I can't think of an excuse to motivate myself.

Was I so peeved that Alice was going to do everything for Tomozou-san's sake? Why?

Even I felt I should not let this go on. It's work, and I'm the detective's assistant.

*

The following day was Friday, a work day for me. I had some matters to settle at home, so I was a little late; I arrived at the ramen shop, which would be opened an hour later. I was way too late, and had to be told off by Min-san.

There was a blue van parked before the ramen shop, with the white words 'Okabayashi Sundries' upon it.

Never thought the shop's opened. There were the voices of a few men. I got to the back door, and slipped into the kitchen.

"You're late, Narumi."

Min-san yapped as she kept watching the Chinese wok atop the strong flames, and I shrivelled back in shock.

"Sorry for disturbing you when you're not opened yet."

Tomozou-san, seated at the counter, grinned away, while two uncles, our regular customers, were next to him, already drinking as they ate the dumplings. If I remembered correctly, one of them was a (self-proclaimed) antique car dealer, while the other's a (self-proclaimed) real estate manager.

"Welcome."

I quickly washed my hands, and put on my apron.

“Tomozou-san, is it fine for you to be drinking when you drove here?”

“I’m not drinking at all. And I’m at work here. I’m not going to do such a stupid thing. Since I can’t open my shop now, I need to deliver to earn some money.”

“It’s fine, drink up, young man.”

“Yeah, drinking. Might as well drink up when you don’t know when the shop will be closed.”

The two red-faced uncles were seated to the sides of Tomozou-san, yapping away.

“These are my regular customers. They caught me while I was doing my deliveries.”

Tomozou-san said with a wry look.

So the beer we sell was delivered from Okabayashi Sundries? I didn’t know about this at all.

“Nabeshima and Kubota rice wine just came in. I wanted to have a few sips at the back, but these guys came running after smelling it. Seriously, I’m still preparing.”

Min-san grumbled away as she stir-fried some pork liver, tossing it about.

“But speaking of which, it’s too bad Okabayashi Sundries is going to close down...”

The sun had yet to set, but the real estate dealer was completely red faced, sprawled over on the counter, muttering away.

“Oh yeah, that, vodka with the skull logo on the bottle, what’s the name again? Your shop is the only one that sells it, boss. I still want a few drinks.”

“I too started buying alcohol from Okabayashi’s since your father’s time. Don’t forget to look for me when you’re closing down. I’m going to drink a 4 ton truck there. Sell me at half price.” The antique car dealer quipped, “No, it’s not closing down. Don’t worry.”

Tomozou-san smiled, looking sheepish.

“Alright, we’ll have a drinking party to mourn over Okabayashi’s closing!”

“Alright! Drink on! Min-san, bring in all the beer you bought today!”

Tomozou-san’s words fell on deaf ears as the two uncles created a ruckus. I continued to chop the onions and cabbage, staring at this scene dryly.

Finally, both of them were sprawled upon the counter. It’s only 5pm, you know?”

“Narumi, wring the wallets out of these two and throw them out. They’ll obstruct our business.” Min-san coldly stated, “Ehhh...that’s impossible.”

“What’s with you, Tomozou? Why are you spacing out here?”

“Hm.”

Tomozou-san had his hand on his face, his head lowered in silence, only to lift it once he heard Min-san’s voice. For a moment, I was taken aback, as it seemed Tomozou-san was crying. However, it was just an illusion due to the shadows.

“...I’m just thinking that these drunks are hoping for me to import some fine booze, I can’t let the shop close down...”

“Say it isn’t so.”

Min-san retorted, and served a glass of ice cream to Tomozou-san. It’s crème brûlée with caramel sauce on it. Though this is a ramen shop, it’s famous because of Min-san’s handmade ice cream.

“Didn’t you say so at your dad’s funeral? That you’re going to keep selling booze so that you can send a bunch of drunks into hell, that your dad won’t get lonely in the other world?”

“Did I really say something that embarrassing?”

“Of course, but only I heard that.”

Tomozou-san chuckled, scooped a spoonful, and put the crème brûlée into his mouth.

“Why exactly? Before dad had that accident, I intended to go to college like an ordinary person, find a job after I graduate, like that. But after seeing so

many of our old customers at the funeral, and mom saying that we can't keep the shop running, I—”

Tomozou-san's eyes looked as bleak as the winter.

“Ahh, when I thought that the shop's gone, I just, well, made up my mind.”

“You sure shocked the teacher guiding you on your prospects, so much that a house visit was made. Your grades were good.”

“Yeah, that happened alright. Shocked my mom too.”

Both of them looked at each other, and laughed.

“Actually...on the day before my dad got caught in that accident, I was drinking with him, for the first time in my life. He was all drunk, even telling me his ideals of selling alcohol, “Anyone has a bottle of wine that really suits him. No matter the customer, I hope to sell him the bottle that belongs to him” that's why he had so many brands crammed in that little shop. I dismissed him as spouting nonsense, that he just wanted to drink. Who knew he would die the following day? Despicable, isn't it? Saying such words to me means that I have to take over now, right?”

Tomozou-san said with a slightly agitated tone, and sighed hard. Min-san in turn narrowed her eyes, nonchalantly stating, “Well I've been thinking that even if uncle didn't die from that accident, you would have taken over the booze business. You did like that shop, didn't you, Tomozou? That's the reason.”

Tomozou-san widened his eyes, seemingly surprised, and then nodded his head lightly.

“I guess...probably due to this reason.”

These two are so similar, so I thought.

Just like her father, who abandoned his ramen shop and vanished, Min-san continued to run this 'Ramen Hanamaru'. To be honest, the fact that they had something worth protecting left me a little envious.

But Min-san again looked down at the chopping board, and muttered,

“To be honest, you don't have any work later, right?”

Tomozou-san widened his eyes, and then inserted his spoon into the ice cream, sighing,

“Your instincts are as sharp as before.”

“If you had any work, you wouldn’t be spending the time here with those two geezers, would you?”

Tomozou-san grimaced, as though he had bitten charcoal.

“We have been receiving fewer orders recently. Maybe the customers nearby heard that our wine got mixed with stuff. Even if I can keep the shop opened, it doesn’t look good...and if that happens again, I really don’t know how to go about apologizing.”

Tomozou-san lowered his head, and placed his elbows on the counter, looking as though he had shrank some.

“So I say, Tomozu.”

Min-san showed a nice, kind smile I had never seen before.

“if you got some troubles, look for these guys. These guys are all useless dropouts, but they do have the time and determination to handle those rough things.”

Min-san grabbed my head and ruffled it. I was rooted to the spot, and looked back and forth between Min-san and Tomozou-san.

The latter scratched the tip of his nose awkwardly,

“You guys...are detectives?”

I hesitated for a moment, and nodded.

I’m not an ordinary detective, a NEET detective. Even in this vast, we’re still able to hear the voiceless words of a certain person.

“I see. Understood.” Tomozou-san stood up from the chair, “I shall leave it to you. Please help assist to ensure that it doesn’t happen again.”

I took a deep breath, and nodded again.

“Understood.”

This time, I had no hesitation in my reply.

It's no longer a lack of motivation being the matter here. That little wine shop had the wishes of the dead, and the wishes of the living; I do want to chip in an effort, all to protect this wishes.

"So it's decided. The one fooling around down there can come out and play detective now."

Min-san suddenly said this as she looked beyond my shoulder. I turned around in surprise, and found a pair of eyes peering in through the door gap 15cm wide, taken aback as they blinked, before leaving the door.

I nudged aside the back door of the kitchen, and Alice, who came down in her pajamas, pouted as she lowered her head.

"What are you doing...no need to hide around, right?"

"I wasn't hiding around. The shop reeks of alcohol, and I don't want to go in!"

A blushing Alice hollered as she remained red-faced, and behind me, Tomozou-san chuckled.

"I'll get these two drunks out then. Thanks Hanada. Nice ice cream."

"Wait a minute, Tomozou, pay up."

"Eh, I have to pay?"

"The beer you brought got them drunk, so it's your responsibility."

"What's with that logic?"

While Min-san and Tomozou-san were bickering away, Alice's legs probably went numb with the waiting as she suddenly shoved me aside and barged into the shop, "Listen up, Tomozou, I'll quickly settle this request and make you regret not asking me earlier. Prepare yourself."

With Alice pointing at his nose, Tomozou-san blinked in surprise, and smile, saying,

"Right, got it. Never thought I'll actually bother you, Yuuko. Leaving it to you then."

Alice turned to leave the kitchen, her long black hair making an arc, "Narumi,

come to the office for a meeting once you're done with work!" She said to me.

*

Two days later, on Sunday, there was finally progress. After receiving Alice's call, and without finishing my lunch, I got onto my bicycle and rode to Okabayashi Sundries.

I spotted the signboard of the shop, followed by Tomozou-san's angry growling, and I had to brake abruptly.

"Shut up, you're annoying. How many times did I say that I'm not going to agree? I'm busy."

The door open, and a short middle-aged man dressed in a grey suit hurriedly exited.

"No, not at all. Our company does understand your predicament well, Okabayashi-sama."

"Enough already, go back."

The man kept lowering his head apologetically, and Tomozou-san tossed the namecard back at him, slamming the door hard. The piece of paper floated forlornly.

Fuu, the man sighed, and took out his handkerchief to wipe his sweat. Once he spotted me, he was taken aback, and hurried towards the supermarket.

...Who is he?

"Ahh, what, you're here?"

A little crease opened, and Tomozou-san poked his head out of the door.

"That guy's not wandering around anymore, right?"

"Eh, ah, y-yes."

"Hurry in now."

Tomozou-san grabbed and pulled me into the shop, and quickly closed the door.

“Who was that just now?”

“The store manager next door. I did mention him before, right? He’s the one going around trying to get us to sell the land. I don’t know how many times I shooed him, but he just kept coming back. Seriously, I’m not in the mood to deal with him.”

It seemed Tomozou-san was really peeved. It’s no wonder however, as there were a few sample of wine on the floor, like the last time.

Someone tamped with them.

“My mom found out this time. Good thing I haven’t caused any inconvenience to the customers.”

Tomozou-san laid out the bottles one by one, looking depressed as he said,

“Last night, before I went out, I had the wine I wanted to deliver placed there. This morning, my mom had a look, and found that there’s oil or something mixed inside. Argh, I wanted to open shop this week.”

“Where were they placed?”

“In the storage, of course.”

I stared at the corridor reaching deep behind the counter. So even the stuff inside the storage was tampered? The culprit went that far? For the sake of obstructing business?

Aunty appeared from behind the counter.

“Tomozou, did the shop manager show up?”

“I chased him away.”

“Seriously, how can you? Always chasing other people away without hearing them out...I should go over to apologize.”

“Don’t do anything unnecessary. Why listen to them? They’re aiming for our house. Are you really intending to sell the shop to them?”

“Instead of fighting on for the sake of pride, why not sell the land to use as a parking lot?”

“Are you serious?”

Tomozou-san approached the counter, utterly fuming. I really could not remain in the shop, and was seriously thinking of slipping away.

“This shop was opened out of your dad’s own interest, right? You’re causing trouble for your customers, and making Yumi-chan go through so much—”

“And that’s why I’ll can’t give up here.”

“Ahh goodness, I’m going to go over to apologize...”

Aunty removed the apron, and went into the house again. It seemed Tomozou-san wanted to yell something at her, but once he glanced aside at me, he was a little hesitation, and merely returned to testing the items.

After aunty entered the house, Major showed up.

“I was too careless. I should have defended the base for the entire night.”

Major gritted his teeth with much regret, and at the same time, took back the contents of the cameras installed at the three locations.

“Vice-Admiral Fujishima, bring these back to the office. I will stay here to strengthen the security, and not let a single ant in. I will dig up foxholes and set up booby traps, and make sure anyone approaching will be wiped out.”

“Enough already, you criminal.”

Good thing Tomozou-san retorted here, or nobody’s going to cut out on Major’s boasting.

“Erm, do I help out?”

“It’s more important to deliver the footage to Alice. Aren’t you more adept at handling video footage, Vice Admiral Fujishima? Tetsu will drop by later, so leave it to us.”

It just seemed like I was kicked out from the scene and acting as gofer for some reason, but Major’s right. I could only put the video memory card into my back, and left the shop.

There was a small white piece of paper on the floor outside the door; it was the card Tomozou-san just threw out. I picked it up to have a look, and found

the words “Ricomart Holdings Private Limited, Business Promotion Chief Hotta Kiyoshi.”, along with the company address and phone number. I only heard that he was the store manager, but he’s pretty much an executive big shot in the company...

“...Hm?”

I had a look at the namecard, and felt that something was amiss. I tried flipping the namecard over and over again, even checking from various angles, but I could not figure out what was amiss.

What was it? While I was finally about to figure out something.

“Huh, you’re heading back?”

I heard a voice, and hurriedly stuffed the namecard into my pocket. I lifted my head, and saw aunty returning from the supermart.

“Sorry for having you witness something embarrassing. We have been arguing recently.”

She shook her head, giving a wry smile. Truly, I did not know how to answer. Did I really lack presence?”

Aunty stood at the door for quite a while, and lifted her head at the signboard, before lowering her head again, sighing. She probably felt awkward, I guess. They just had a quarrel, so it’s no wonder she’s like this.

“But it’s just some small, meaningless shop...”

Aunty’s smile was filled with melancholy.

“Alcoholics really aren’t suited to manage wine shops. That husband of mine, and Tomozou, both of them paid no thought to anything other than the shop.

Aunty let out a deep, reluctant sigh.

“Was his father...like that too?”

I asked without thinking too much. Aunty’s sidelong face was too depressing.

“Yes...while we did not have many customers, he would drive the truck everywhere, looking for the goods as long as he was requested. He never had a good sleep, and ended up in that accident. It’s stupid. I don’t want his child to

end up like that either."

I gulped.

"I should have struggled on alone and made sure that child went to college."

Aunty shook her head,

"He probably had lots of things he wanted to do, yet he just kept working, and working every day after he left high school."

I guess men are fools, no? Aunty muttered to herself, and I could not answer, except to nod politely, and escape to where I parked my bicycle.

I entered the office, and found Alice, along with another visitor.

"Oh, Narumi-kun, nice timing."

Seated on the near side of the bed was the posh-looking, host-like youth Hiro, who was dressed in cream-colored short blouson, and grey slacks. He was holding a bath towel, holding a pair of scissors and hair care, gently combing Alice's long hair.

"What are you doing..."



“Taking care of the hair. This room is dry, and there is a need to moisten.”

“Hiro, are you done yet? I’m feeling stressed now that I can’t move my head around.”

Alice, facing the screen, did not sound too happy.

“How about you learn how to take care of the hair too, Narumi-kun? I can teach you.”

“Why do I have to do this?”

“Aren’t you the detective assistant?”

Yeah, I’m the detective assistant. So what?

“Am I going to experience such suffering every day if you teach Narumi? Stop that already!”

Alice kept tapping at the keyboard. So everyone thinks that I have nothing better to do?

“But hair needs to be cared for every day. Alice, your long hair is a work of art, and it doesn’t just belong to you.”

“If it doesn’t just belong to me, then who else?”

Hiro’s sweet talk should be able to sink the hearts of many ladies, but it seemed completely ineffective on Alice. I was a little relieved.

...Why am I feeling relieved?

“Actually, I got the camera recordings. Don’t you want to check them?”

The only thing I could assist Alice with was to handle the footage. Hiro gave me some room, and I was nudged the pile of dolls aside, finally having space on the bed.

When was it that I could get onto the bed and approach like that? While I was wondering, the mouse was moved over to me.

“You’re in charge of watching the video. If you see anyone on the TV, extract that part.”

“I know.”

*

Late at night, once all the customers at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’ had finally dispersed, the NEET detective team gathered at the back door. It was a long time since the trio were gathered. Tetsu-senpai looked grim.

“We figured out the likely period the wine was tampered.” Senpai said, “Only one was affected this time. We searched through all the stocks in the shop too. I don’t want to do this a third time.”

Speaking of which, it did seem senpai did help out with the testing the first time. To do the same thing twice in a short period of time is mentally draining.

“The tampered wine was one of those Tomozou-san brought out yesterday evening, to be delivered to the customer. Aunty discovered it this morning, so it’s like that’s the period it was tampered.”

“I had a rough check through all the footage, but the problem is that nobody actually approached the warehouse though?”

“And there aren’t any other cameras in the storage. I should have splurged and installed infrared cameras.”

Major obviously looked peeved, for despite installing the high grade equipment he was confident in, the shop was broken into.

“Are there any other entrances to the storage?” Hiro asked, but Tetsu-senpai shook his head.

“Then how did the culprit get in? Are we sure it was fine when Tomozou-san put it there? Was it tampered before he did so? Like if he missed out during the first tests...?”

“That’s impossible.” Tetsu-senpai concluded.

“Don’t be too hasty to conclude. Think about it again. The last time Tomozou-san saw those bottles of wine, they were fine, and nobody actually approached the storage until aunty found it. Didn’t you see it too, Narumi-kun?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Then isn’t this an impossible crime? There’s no other way to slip into the

warehouse."

Tetsu-senpai and Major appeared to have issues with Hiro's ideas, but they remained silent.

"Erm."

I suddenly thought of something, and voiced out. The trio turned to look at me in unison, and I was a little scared, but I took out a printed footage of the camera in the shop, and placed it on the wooden stool in the middle."

"There's a way to enter the storage without being seen on the camera."

"What?"

Major asked, looking displeased.

"What method?" Tetsu-senpai folded his arms.

"Well...in other words...I pointed at a corner of the printout, the part where the cupboards of the shop was taken, "Isn't there a blind spot behind the counter? If you bend down, head past the counter, and enter the corridor..."

The black noren and the back of the counter formed a blind spot the camera could not capture.

"But even if there is a blind spot, if you enter from the door inside, you'll be seen on the cameras... ahh."

Tetsu-senpai swallowed his words.

"So the culprit entered from the house?"

Hiro continued. I nodded.

To the right of the counter was Tomozou-san's house. If one ducked down to evade from the camera, it would be very possible to enter the corridor leading to the storage.

"Okabayashi Sundries is closed for now, and it's not like there's anyone in the shop at all times. Anyone can enter if they want to, I guess?"

"Wait, Vice Admiral Fujishima." Major cut me off, "We can't just decide if it's possible or not. This isn't a quiz. If anyone's to enter like that, he has to figure out where the cameras are set."

Ah...I see.

My thought process was always based on ‘it’s impossible to be caught on camera’, but that’s only if there’s anyone who knows what’s going on in the shop. As Major said, this isn’t a quiz. To enter this way, one would have to know where the cameras are set, and also know ‘I won’t get caught on camera if I head at the inner side of the counter’.

“But right now, the only plausible method is suggested by Narumi-kun.” Hiro supported my idea.

“But Hiro, if we can’t be sure of where the cameras are set, it’s impossible to enter like this.”

“Got it, the culprit is Major.”

“Right!”

Tetsu-senpai concluded, and Hiro added fuel to the fire, resulting in a short skit. Hiro and Tetsu-senpai acted as constable, lawyer and judge, while Major half-jokingly protested his innocence. Finally, the cruel verdict was a denkianma for three straight hours, before the trio before me returned to reality and sighed hard. These guys really look like they’re having fun all the time...

So Major was trying to clear the mood as he suddenly changed the topic,

“Let’s not talk about how the intrusion was down. Hiro, didn’t you say the outside camera caught a suspect?”

Hiro glanced aside at me, and went from one folding leg to another, nodding away. I placed the printed pictures on the table; these were the footages I extracted from the front and back doors.

There were eight photos in total, all of them catching sight of the same middle aged man, the unimpressive looking supermarket manager.

“He was wandering around Okabayashi Sundries the past two days, twice per day.” I explained.

“Who’s he? Did you find out about him, Hiro?”

“Yeah I did. I went to the supermarket, checked with the company too. He should be innocent though.”

“So that’s why you’re in a suit.”

After the footage was checked at noon, Hiro changed into a suit and went out to investigate, only returning just a moment back. He’s a gigolo who had nothing to do, yet quick on the go at such matters.

“Hotta Kiyoshi, the business growth manager of Ricomart. He’s high ranked, but it’s the first shop they established, and they needed to get operations up and running, so he’s shop manager too. It seemed he’s dropping by the head office every alternate day, and showing up at the shop on other days. He’s really busy.”

“So he’s trying to get Okabayashi Sundries bankrupt so that he can get the land for parking lots?”

“That’s too farfetched. He’s an executive of a big company here. If news get out, his life will be ruined.”

“But he’s really as annoying as a stalker here, telling Tomozou-san to sell the land every day. He just have the criminal feeling to him.” Major said.

“He was wandering around the shop over the past two days, and to be honest, he’s a little weird. But...even if the shop closes, the land won’t necessarily be sold. Is he that stupid?”

Hiro folded his arms again,

“Do you know when this Hotta went to the shop, and to the corporate office?” I asked.

“Hm? He was at the shop yesterday, and the day before. Three days ago, he was at the corporate office. Why?”

“Ah, it’s not.” I was dejected, “I was wondering if he did see Major installing the cameras...doesn’t seem that way though.”

The cameras were installed three days ago. If he did go to the corporate office that day, it would be impossible.”

“Are you still harping on the idea that anyone can duck under the counter to hide from the cameras, Vice Admiral Fujishima?” Major sounded a little impatient. Is that a bad thing?

At that moment, I suddenly thought of something.

Suddenly, I thought of something.

There was someone else who could have seen the installation of the cameras-.

Yumi-san.

She just so happened to be leaving Okabayashi Sundries when I arrived, and wandered around for a moment. Maybe she saw Major installing the cameras.

Also, she had a motive.

Once Okabayashi Sundries go down, the shackle preventing her from marrying Tomozou-san will be gone.

I swallowed this bitter feeling. So being a detective's such an annoying thing?
"What is it?"

Hiro suddenly noticed me being silent, and looked at my face. I brooded for a moment, and finally spoke up, "Erm...please don't laugh if you hear this. It's the same thought, but just a guess."

I tried to defend myself before sharing my suspicions about Yumi-san. Major rolled his eyes at me, Hiro looked startled, and Tetsu-senpai just burst out laughing.

"I said it was a guess..."

"Hm...ahh, sorry for laughing. Yumi-san's fine though. Definitely not her. After Tomozou-san sorted out the wine, he went out with her, until this morning."

"Eh...?"

A perfect alibi.

I hunch over, and sighed, wanting to stick my head between my thighs. Actually, I too heaved a sigh of relief. I really didn't want to suspect Yumi-san.

"He said they had a quarrel. Maybe it's because they were dating? At this critical moment..."

"No, I heard it's for work. Said that there's some wine tasting. Even the

businesses from Okinawa participated, and he had some wine he wanted to import. That's why he had aunty watch the shop, and went out."

I see. Since both of them couldn't open a shop, and there's no orders to deliver, so he could only focus on importing? Well, these two are kinda hardworking...

Hm? Okinawa?

"So both of them kept drinking until the next morning?"

"I really don't know whether those two are on good terms or not..."

"Well, whatever. I'll go have a chat with Yumi-san. Maybe she saw something on the day the cameras were installed?"

"Hiro, you know her?"

"No need to know a pretty lady beforehand if I want to hear her out."

"Don't hear her out in a hotel though. Tomozou-san's going to kill you."

"Well, got to look at the mood first. I can't give any guarantees~"

Tetsu-senpai smacked Hiro in the back of the head, and they stood up, along with Major. The trio bumped fists right above the wooden, and quietly departed the valley between the buildings.

I was left behind, and was left strangely helpless, unable to escape the third floor of the emergency staircase, and could only look down at the ground blankly.

If Okabayashi Sundries goes down, will Tomozou-san and Yumi-san get married? I suddenly had this thought. Alice might be sad, right...? Speaking of which, that's the reason why Alice's working hard to investigate this, isn't it?

So what should I do?

A thought suddenly appeared in my mind, but I didn't know how to handle to. It was really way out there, such that I sensed that I could not just leave it as it was, that I had to investigate.

While the foolish thoughts in my mind kept swelling to the point of explosion, an icy object suddenly approached my face.

“—Woah.”

I tilted back in shock, and rolled down the stairs.

“Shut up. Keep it down, will you?”

It was Min-san. It seemed the ramen shop had closed for the day. Min-san had taken off her tank top, and was in a sarashi again. She shoved the cup of ice cream into my hands, and sat next to me. You know, I really had been thinking about this for a while, but I really don’t know where to look at when you’re like that.

“You’re not eating? I’m going to finish both.”

Min-san said as she put a spoonful of her portion into the mouth. I hurriedly picked up my spoon.

“This...is Japanese wine flavored?”

“Yep. Tomozou-san delivered some nice sweet wine, so I tried it out. I always wanted to, but it’s too bad I couldn’t find a matching Japanese wine...”

The ice cream melted on my tongue, and the scent of rice whiffed past my nostrils.

“Nice?”

I nodded. I really was grateful this person here did not give up her dreams on making ice cream while focusing on cooking ramen.

“I have a request too.”

“...Eh?”

“I will be bothered if that shop closes down too. Go help him out.”

I stared blankly at Min-san’s sidelong face, and after a long while, I nodded firmly.

Why say such things to me? I couldn’t help but wonder. But actually, there’s no need to think much into this problem. Min-san probably understood that I was brooding over such a stupid issue, I guess.

I really owed a lot of favors. I took another mouthful of this ice cream with a complex taste. Due to the alcohol, the warmness grazed my throat.

I'm a detective assistance, and had accepted Tomozou-san's request. I swallowed the ice cream that was as sweet and bitter as this fact, and stood up.

*

That night, I did my own investigations in my room, a rarity at that. While it's investigating, I might say that I was just searching the internet. I was being a small time NEET detective. Truth be told though, it's better than relying on Alice all the time.

There were two name cards on the table, side by side. One of them was Yumi-san's while the other's Hotta Kiyoshi's. The address of both companies were on the same floor. This was the strangeness I sensed when I picked up Hotta-shi's namecard.

And I quickly found the answer.

The parent company of Ricomart so happened to be Wakui Food Corporation Pte Ltd, Yumi-san's company.

It's hard to imagine it being a coincidence, but the relationship between Hotta Kiyoshi and Yumi-san was established. I camped in this bedroom without lights sighing at the monitor.

There was something else I was concerned with. The Shisa display. Didn't Tomozou-san visit the Okinawan businessman to find the other matching Shisa?

That answer remained hidden within the vast internet.

"...Ahh. May 13th. So that's how it is, huh...?"

I recalled all the things Tomozou-san said, and muttered to myself as I nodded always. While this probably had nothing to do with the case, it blew at the necessary truth I was trying to come up with.

I guess that kind of a nice shop shouldn't close down after all.

*

The following day, after school.

“The parent company of Ricomart?”

I finally summoned the courage to ask, while Alice, holed up under the blanket on the bed of the detective agency, nonchalantly responded.

“Wakui Food Corporation. Wakui Yumi’s father is the chairman.”

“So you found out already...?”

“What?”

I was feeling really jumpy, but I barely managed to continue my explanation. Yumi-san might have witnessed the cameras being installed, but had an alibi on the day the wine was tampered. On the other hand, while Hotta Kiyoshi didn’t see the installation, but he had been wandering around Okabayashi Sundries when the incidents happened. In other words...

“If both of them have colluded, that Wakui Yumi informed Hotta Kiyoshi of the installed cameras, and there might be a possibility of a break-in, so I may say.”

“Yes.”

Why was she able to remain so calm? While nodded away, I was left confused.

“So what should I say? How short-circuited your thought process is has left me speechless. Are those two the only suspects in your mind?”

“Ugh...well, it’s too much to dismiss it as a coincident.”

“How is this just a coincidence? Have you forgotten? Wakui Food Corporation and Okabayashi Sundries have been on familiar terms with each other since the last generation. In any case, that ‘Ricomart’ might have been opened as ordered by Wakui Food Corporation, aiming for Okabayashi Sundries.”

Opened--aiming for the shop?

Wh-what does this mean? A massive flag raised just to topple over a little wine shop? What’s with that? Isn’t that more ridiculous than my guess.

“But there is something I need you to handle. With that, you can get rid of that utterly pessimistic doubt.”

It appeared from Alice's tone that my suggestion was an irrational delusion not worth considering.

She waved her hand, and so I got onto the bed with an abnormally tense heart.

"Erm." So I asked without thinking.

"What?"

"About that, well, you don't think of anything when I'm just getting onto the bed as I please, do you?"

Alice widened her eyes, blinking, tilting her head in confusion,

"Ah—no, sorry."

If she was concerned, she wouldn't have let me onto the bed, I guess? I sat down at the keyboard, right beside Alice, and appearing on the many screens were the surveillance footages of Okabayashi Sundries.

"Based on your assumption, nobody can be caught on camera if they bend down behind the counter and head to the storage. Am I correct?"

"...Yes."

"But is it really a complete blind spot?"

Upon hearing Alice's words, I tried enlarging the image of that part. As expected of a high definition camera from Major, even after enlarging, there were no mosaics.

There was a dark blue noren hanging at the entrance to the corridor at the back of the counter, and if something ducked down and slowly approached there to enter, the cameras shouldn't be able to pick it up.

"No...it's not a completely blind spot, I guess?"

The noren did not completely cover the corridor, and there was a gap between the walls, and also a partition between the norens, which I could vaguely see what was behind. If someone passed through the corridor, there should be some movements on the teeny gaps shown on the footage.

"So now, let's start searching using the possible times the crime could have

been done. I'll edit the code, and you figure out the footage you can identify."

"...Yeah."

If we're going to narrow our search for any particular range over a long time, it'll be easier to write a code than it is to observe with the naked eye.

The search time would be the twenty hours since Tomozou-san was done assembling and left the storage.

About 20 hours passed until the following day, when aunty found that the wine was following day.

Within 30 seconds, the code Alice write quickly scanned through the footage over the past twenty hours.

But it did not stop.

"You know what this means, right?"

She muttered by my ear, and I could only nod blankly."

"Oh, we got mail."

She turned to the other screen. I really could not believe this outcome, so I ran the script again. The results were the same. A calculator could never make a mistake; the one at fault every time is a human.

Nobody approached the storage during the last 20 hours.

In that case, how did the culprit do it?

How did the culprit enter the storage?

"Hm? Sesame oil? Perfect."

Alice suddenly noted. I looked over at the screen, and saw her close the email.

"...What was that?"

"The analysis of the impurities mixed into the wine. It's said that it's just sesame oil. Alright, time to see how to end this..."

How to end this...?

"The truth is out, isn't it?"

“Ehhh?”

Alice shrugged.

“Please don’t make a fuss out of everything. Do you think that’s a prerequisite of a detective’s assistant or something?”

“No, but.”

“The path leading to the truth is always so simple, but the detective’s job happens after the truth is discovered.”

Alice took off the blanket draped over her shoulders, and opened the cupboard. It was the first time I had looked into the cupboard, and colourful dresses were hanging neatly there. So she has so many clothes after all...?

Finally, she took out one set, and laid it out on the table. It was a plain, black, nothing fancy on it.

The mourning clothes I always saw.

Alice returned to the bedside, and started undoing her pajamas, starting from the top button.

...W-wait a sec. I hurriedly got off the bed.

“Voice out before you change clothes!”

“Hm? Where are you going? It’s hard to pull the zip on the back of this dress. Wait, you.”

I say,

Anyway, it’s pointless to say anything more, so I hid in the kitchen and waited for Alice to be done changing. After a while, I heard her giving a call to someone else.

“Tomozou? It’s me. Come over to ‘Hanamaru’...hm? With your girlfriend? It’s fine, perfect. What’s with the courtesy...no, it hasn’t ended. Just a little longer.”

“...Yes, gather at ‘Hanamaru’. Tomozou seems free at 9 or so, so that time... yes, it’s over. I understand.”

She put down the receiver.

“Narumi, the zipper on the back, please.”

Alice probed her face from the other side of the freever. I sighed, and stood up.

Alice was wearing her mourning clothes.

In other words, the case was going to end.

*

It was 9pm when Alice and I left the office. We descended the emergency staircase, and heard the voices of many coming from “Ramen Hanamaru”.

“Never saw you go all out in a while, Tomozou-san.”

“No no, don’t tempt me.”

“It’s fine, tempt him, that’ll be good for business here. Hey Tomozou, drink up as much as you want. I’ll send you back home.”

“So who’s better at holding liquor? You or Yumi-san?”

“If it’s only Shōchū, I am better than Tomo-kun.”

“Stop lying. I’m better here. Bring them all here.”

“So a drinking contest?”

“Wait, I can’t drink much recently. Sorry...”

“It’s fine. Open that bottle I just sent over. I’ll finish it all.”

“Tomozou-san’s a goner!”

Yumi-san...you called us “the kids who’s up to something”, but you sure got them familiar, I guess? Beer’s really powerful. I was about to approach the back door of the kitchen, but Alice tugged at my sleeve.

“We’re leaving from the back door.”

“Eh? Aren’t you looking for Tomozou-san?”

“Be quiet. Let them drink all they want. We’re headed for Okabayashi Sundries.”

I didn't know why at all. Then why call Tomozou-san over?

We passed through the buildings, and went to the parking lot at the back. Once she saw my bicycle that was parked there, Alice looked really mortified, "...We're going on a bicycle?"

"Not like we got any choice?"

How am I supposed to ferry this one here dressed in a fluffy skirt and holding a bear doll? What if my classmates see me?

"Can't we get Hiro to drive you there?"

"Hiro's the only one that if he's gone, Tomozou will be suspicious."

Alice sat sideway on the back rack, holding my waist with trembling hands. The bear doll was pressing firmly on my back.

"...Y-you hear me? Slow down. As slow as possible, and no sudden turns. If the ground is uneven, warn me beforehand."

Good grief, I shook my head, and kicked the bicycle stand off.

*

Okabayashi Sundries was already buried in darkness. In contrast, the supermarket next door was lit, making this place a lot darker. I got off the bicycle, and the arms wrapped around my waist suddenly loosened, causing me to hurriedly reach for Alice, who nearly fell from the rack.

"...You okay?"

"Uu...yeah."

Even through the black veil, I could see Alice's pale face. Stop forcing youself.

"Do you ride such a barbaric transportation tool to school every day? This is unbelievable."

"Your first time riding a bicycle?"

"I honestly wish this is the first and the last time."

"We still have to ride once back, don't we?"

“Uuu...”

As usual, Alice had the teddy bear pressed on my back as she grabbed my belt firmly.

“Let’s hurry, I have difficulty breathing at a place without a ceiling.”

We went to the back of Okabayashi Sundries, and pressed the doorbell.

“I’m here...oh?”

Aunty came to the door, and was mystified once she saw Alice behind me. It’s wonder though.

“...Tomozou went to the ramen ship.”

“E-erm, we’re aren’t here to look for Tomozou-san. I want to check the storage again. As for the one behind me, please don’t mind.”

Aunty remained perplexed, but she let us into the house.

“Are you Yuuko-chan? I heard from Tomozou...you look pale. Are you fine?”

“She’s always like this, don’t mind.” I spoke up for Alice.

We entered the corridor, and Alice nearly collapsed on the floor, so I just grabbed her and pulled her up.

The lighting in the storage was darker than usual, and the air inside was rather chilly.

“And then? What are we looking for?”

“Sesame oil.”

Sesame oil?”

“That sesame oil mixed with the wine? Over here? Maybe the culprit took it away?”

“It’s definitely here. Don’t ask, just look.”

It seemed Alice did not intend to take action personally. Well, she’s dressed like that, and can’t really be looking around like that, but for me, I don’t really mind...

The daily necessities were placed at the innerside of the racks. Sauces, mirin,

salad oils, wheat, potato starch...these things were all stacked on the racks in boxes, unpacked, and finally, I found the box of sesame oil before me.

I opened the cardboard box, and immediately found it. A plastic seal on a bottle of sesame oil was ripped aside. I took it out, and found that the content had been reduced.

“...This one?”

I took the bottle out to Alice, and she nodded, looking pleased.

“Then it’s all solved.”

“What’s solved? Why don’t I get anything? You know the culprit?”

“Of course. Don’t you understand? The culprit can only tamper the wine in the storage, because that thing has to be in the storage.”

“Why?”

“Because of the camera.”

“Camera? Didn’t you just write the code? Nobody actually approached the storage.”

“Think about it again. The time Tomozou sorted the wine, left the storage, and until the time the wine was found to be tampered with. You did check through the footage with me, didn’t you?”

“So I say, nobody approached the storage...”

“Wasn’t there someone?”

Someone.

But of all the recordings I searched through, from the moment Tomozou-san left the storage, until the following day— I nearly blurted out.

Right.

There was someone.

The answer was so easy, I took it for granted. That answer was something nobody had realized.

No, but, why?

“The other possibilities do not tally, and while the one possibility left might seem unbelievable—it is the undisputed truth. Don’t you think so?”

Alice’s final words were not directed at me. She slowly turned towards the entrance of the storage.

Standing there with a pale face was aunty, who then tumbled and fell on her back.

“But...why did you do this?”

I eked out a voice, and it shook the silence that had gathered in this icy storage.

Aunty covered her face with both hands, her shoulders shivering.

It was aunty who found that the wine was mixed with impurities on Sunday. In other words, this person here caused the commotion by boldly entered the storage before the cameras, added sesame oil into the wine so boldly, and declared that someone tampered it.

But nobody suspected her.

Other than Alice.

The problem is—why do this?

“You probably want to close this shop in a way Tomozou won’t find out, I guess? There’s no other reason.”

Alice’s voice was colder than the air in the storage.

“That’s because...I...”

Aunty stammered,

“It’s because that boy wouldn’t accept my pleas, always suffering for this shop...he-he has done enough, right? Why can’t he let himself relax a bit? Yumi-chan has been waiting for him all this time, no?”

“That’s it...you want to close the shop personally, just because of that reason?”

A strange sobbing sound could be heard from aunty's mouth.

"He gave his dreams of college for this shop. It's harder to do business now with a supermarket next door. There's no need...to hang on to this torn little shop. He should just get married to Yumi-chan—"

"That should be for Tomozou-san to decided, right?"

"At first." Aunty's voice was quaking, "I thought that if the shop couldn't be opened for the time being, Tomozou would slowly change his mind, so I just... took action without thinking..."

Without thinking? She actually said she took action without thinking?

"But that boy's so stubborn, always thinking about this shop. That Yumi-chan already...so...so I just thought this shop isn't..."

That's it? That's the reason? You rather close this shop Tomozou-san's working hard to save?

The silhouette of the girl in mourning clothes stood forlornly before the sobbing aunty, not saying anything. I too didn't know what to say. What do I do?

At this moment, something at a corner of my eye got my attention.

The black silhouette about the size of two hands clasped together was lying at the bottom leftside of the bottom rack. It was wrapped in plastic, and was a lot larger than the last time I saw it.

Tomozou-san found it, the other missing one.

I closed my eyes, and started to think.

Alice must have faced such issues lots of times before this, I guess? Do I have to break through certain people's hidden heartfelt words with a detective's arrogance? Is this really the right thing to do?

Or is there no need to?

I didn't know. I might think it was a lie. But I really couldn't think of anything, or maybe there wasn't an answer no matter how much I thought into it. That's the pain the speaker of the dead should bear.

“Narumi?”

Alice seemed to have noticed something as she turned her head towards me, but I shook my head towards her, knelt down and unravelled the plastic wrap. A colourful porcelain beast appeared before me—no, there was another. A pair of Shisas.

I carefully carried the two Shisas, and they were a lot heavy than I thought. Maybe it was because they carried some people’s thoughts?

I placed the Shisas before aunty, and they let out a clunk. She lifted her head upon hearing it, her eyes already red and swollen from the crying.

“Aunty, you remember this?”

My voice got softer.”

“...This...is...”

Aunty lowered her hands that were covering her face, and gazed at the Shisas.

“My husband’s...but why are there two?”

“This is the one uncle bought...and left behind as a memorabilia, right?”

I stroked the head of the left Shisa.

“I think this one here was the one Tomozou-san bought on Saturday”

The Shisa on the right looked a lot kinder.

“Actually, uncle wanted to buy a matching pair, but it’s said that he could only get one due to shortage. That’s why Tomozou-san has been looking for the other one, and found it on Saturday.”

“Ah...?”

“This isn’t just a decoration. It’s a wine flask. It contains the wine brewed in Okinawa.”

Aunty’s eyes widened a lot, and Alice gave a little gasp.

“Look, this is the cap. This wine is brewed by a company in Okinawa called Nakijin, and these two...are said to be husband and wife.”

Aunty's hands landed weakly on her thighs. At this point, my eyes weren't on aunty, but at the pair of Shisas before my eyes, and I was practically talking to them.

"I heard that Tomozou-san's father once said, "Anyone has a bottle of wine that really suits him. No matter the customer, I hope to sell him the bottle that belongs to him"."

That became the one wish he couldn't finish. But—Tomozou-san's here."

"His father died without finding the female shisa, so Tomozou-san kept look. To look for that personal bottle of wine before May 13th—so he told me."

The second Sunday of May, to offer this bottle of wine to his mother, in place of a red Carnation.

"So this is actually the wine bottle belonging to you, aunty."

"Belonging...to me..."

I thought of something else I should do, and took a deep breath of icy air.

"Also, there's another bottle."

I took out another Shisa deep within the rack. Right before aunty were three Shisas resting on the icy floor of the storage. I stared at the last one, made up my mind, and said-, "This is probably for Yumi-san. I heard they went together to buy it."

"Eh?"

Aunty lifted her face up towards me,

"These three Shisas represent family, right? What uncle left behind symbolizes Tomozou-san."

I quietly waited for the meaning behind these words to sink into aunty's heart.

"So that means, that boy, and Yumi-chan will..."

I nodded to aunty, my heart aching. It was no longer speaking for the dead.

"I—"

I started, only to swallow my words. Could a detective express his own views? However, Alice kept looking at me, as though nodding. So I continued.

“I can’t drink. I did try once, but I didn’t know how to enjoy the taste. I don’t know if the ‘bottle that belongs to a single person’ uncle really exists. But...”

But I hope it really does.

For that represent Tomozou-san continuing his father’s wishes.

“I think this shop is great, to be looking all over the world for that one bottle of wine. I don’t want it to close before I can enjoy it, so...”

I looked at aunty’s face, which for some reason look hazy. Was she still crying?

“So, aunty, if you agree to it, please pretend not to notice this Shisa and put it back. Wait until next week, and when you receive it from Tomozou-san’s hands, when you show that look of surprise again—”

Continue to run the shop with him.

Aunty slowly reached out towards the Shisa, stroking the smooth surface of the porcelain. She brought it before her eyes, mumbled some words as she kept nodding towards me. Drops of tears kept falling upon the matching Shisas.

As I left Tomozou-san’s house, it seemed the neighboring supermarket was closing as the shutters slowly fell. The lighting shining upon the parking lots shortened as the shutters fell, finally vanishing, leaving behind a cold unbefitting of the start of summer. For a moment, I was unable to move when I was in the storage. If it wasn’t for Alice reaching her hand out to tap at my shoulder, I might not be able to stand up.

So we left aunty behind. I wonder if my words did reach her?

“Of course they did.” Alice chuckled, “You really aren’t suited to be a detective.”

“...Eh?”

“And because of that, I...”

It was rare to see Alice stammer, and she shook her head, making herself more vague.

“Now then, what do you think we should do?”

“What do you mean we should do?”

“Case is closed, and the NEET detective job is done for now. There is something else we have to do, as a normal detective.”

That was to inform the client, Tomozou-san, that the case was settled.

“I’m the speaker of the dead. Once I have complicated feelings to the living...I don’t know what to do.”

Alice, who was behind the doll, seemed so small and helpless. Her voice was right next to me, yet it seemed she was so far away from me.

So I sighed, and answered,

“I think I just need to report half the truth.”

I could not lie, but I could not state all the truths. So...

“I’ll report to him, okay? I’ll just say that we found out who the culprit is, and that the culprit won’t do this again. We can’t reveal the name though.”

But Tomozou-san might figure out who the culprit was if he heard that.

“I guess...well, I shall inform Tomozou instead. A detective’s reputation will be ruined if such an important job is left to the assistant, and furthermore,” with a thud, Alice patted me on the back, “You really can’t lie.”

Aren’t you the same? I wanted to retort, but whatever. Even if Alice did not lie, she could simply dismiss any questions with that arrogant attitude of hers; it’s something this useless assistant here will never be able to learn.

“But...I just said a huge lie.”

“Yes, I know.”

Alice showed a kind smile, and I sighed with relief, nearly crying,

“It just so happened to be one female and two male Shisas. It’s too much to say that the last one is meant for Wakui Yumi.”

“You realized...?”

Tomozou-san kept looking for the female Shisa for his mother; there was no doubt about that. About Yumi-san and the rest later one, it was all nonsense on my part.

“The other male Shisa just happened to be an extra, no? Very few will buy a female one, so by buying a pair representing husband and wife, there will naturally be an extra male. That’s just all, right?”

I knew that very well.

But my words distorted the truth. It became a lie made to touch aunty’s heart.

And even so, Alice showed an understanding, welcoming, kind smile,

“But, Narumi. That is not a lie. That is a ‘story’.”

Story?

“Yes, it is a sculpture of the happiness and despair of reality. One day, it will take form as something. Before then, it cannot be considered a lie, just words you blurted out. You can just wait for Tomozou and Wakui Yumi’s marriage. There is no need to feel guilty.”

As usual, I didn’t get what Alice was saying...no, but...

“Those two can’t get married, right?”

And...wasn’t Alice working so hard to prevent their marriage?

“Not let Tomozou get married? Why would I bother with such a stupid thing?”

Alice widened her eyes in surprise. Eh?

“The main point is, Wakui Yumi is three months pregnant, you know? Even if we let them be, they will get married.”

“Ehhh?” Ho-how do you know that!?

“Didn’t you suspect Wakui Yumi before? I did consider that possibility before, but that was way before you did. So I sent Hiro to investigate, and found that she had been visiting the gynaecologist regularly.”

So the situation between them got that serious and urgent? No, but...

“...Is that okay? Don’t you feel anything about this, Alice?”

“What?”

“No, nothing at all.”

All I knew was that I was gravely mistaken about something. But, no, what’s with Alice’s attitude towards Tomozou-san? My mind was completely confused, yet Alice kept nudging at my back, prompting me to head towards the bicycle parked forlornly in the shadows of the roadside.

“Right, let’s get going. If we don’t hurry, those drunkards might go crazy and get a pregnant lady drunk.”

“Ahh...yeah.”

Alice cautiously sat on the rack, wrapping her arms around my waist as she made this unreasonable request, “Listen, don’t shake, and hurry.” Suddenly, I had a mischievous thought in my mind. Perhaps we could take the longer road...

Two people riding together doesn’t feel bad.

*

Okabayashi Sundries opened shop again the following day. After school, I took a bundle of celebratory flowers and went to the wine shop. They were Tulips grown by the gardening club.

I opened the shop door, and immediately heard Tomozou-san growl, shocking me enough to jolt back.

“How many times have I rejected you? What do I have to do with your company’s business?”

“No, erm, so I say, we won’t be bothering you over the land. About setting up a branch in our shop, please listen.”

“Impossible. Do we look like we have enough staff on hand?”

In front of the counter, kneeling before the round table Tomozou-san was at was that Hotta Kiyoshia-shi. Why’s he here again? Hasn’t he learned his lesson?

Anyway, while this guy has nothing to do with the case, he is way too annoying, isn't he?

"Ah-ah-ah, you do seem to have a guest. I shall take my leave for today. Next time, I shall return if there is an opportunity..."

"I told you not to come back already. Hey, dispense with the door gift. Take it away."

Tomozou-san took out a long, narrow bag.

"Yah, I thought you would be delighted with it, Okabayashi-sama. It's Moriizou."

"Hm?"

Tomozou-san's expression changed. Morrizou's a famous, premier, Shouchuu.

"Don't think you can bribe me with wine."

"No no no, I definitely do not have such intentions. My foresight is no match against yours Okabayashi-sama. I shall take back this terrible gift then."

"No, wait, since you brought it here, I shall accept graciously, but don't come back." So you're accepting?

So Hotta Kiyoshi-shi exited the shop in what could be described as a very artistic bunch.

"Ahh, why do you always see something embarrassing from me..."

Toozou-san slipped the bag under the counter as he said this,

"You say that, but aren't you butting heads against the supermarket people?"

"Well, it doesn't look like they want our land now. They want our shop."

"Shop?"

"Not really." Tomozou-san looked away awkwardly, "He said he wishes for us to open a stand inside the supermarket."

"I see..."

"Seems like their alcohol sales aren't too good, and they need our shop's procurement routes and professional knowledge. That uncle really has it tough."

I really am grateful that I didn't choose to be a salaryman in the first place..."

At this point, I finally realized. Alice did mention this, that 'Ricomart' opened shop, aiming at Okabayashi Sundries. So that's what she meant? Wakui Food Corporation had gone a long way back with Okabayashi Sundries, so they had seen the true value. Looks like things got complicated. It was slow of me, but I handed the flowers.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Well, it's to celebrate the reopening."

"Thanks. Mom went out to deliver, and can't serve you tea. Sorry."

What happened to Tomozou-san and aunty? Did he figure out the truth? Ultimately, I did not know. As for whether there were any customers at Okabayashi's, that's not for me to be worried about. As for how Tomozou-san, hard at work, and Yumi-san would deal with the pregnancy, I didn't know.

But even so, I returned to this shop. That was because I was curious about the reaction from Alice. How should I ask?

"Thanks to you guys."

Tomozou-san merely said this, and heartily laughed. I guess he found out who the culprit was, so my instincts told me. It's only at such useless points that my instincts never went wrong.

"You had it tough too, being Yuuko's assistant. While Tetsu and Hiro have known Yuuko for a long time, they never approached her as much as you did. I guess that's a first for her, to have someone like you remain by her side."

I see—so that's it?

"Tomozou-san."

"Hm?"

"Why do you call Alice, Yuuko?"

"She'll get angry if I call her by her family name. She probably hates her own family."

I see...no, this isn't what I mean!

“No, erm, what I mean is, why her actual name?”

“Eh? Ah, you’re asking this? Before she started the agency, she came over to our shop to buy stuff, and left it on her tab. That’s why I know her name.”

“Alice? Buying things here? But she doesn’t drink alcohol, right?”

Tomozou-san immediately widened his eyes, and then chuckled as he pointed behind my back. I turned around, saw a glass fridge occupying a corner of the shop, and understood everything.

Behind the glass door were rolls of neatly arranged 350ml Dr. Pepper cans. There were the common crimson Dr. Pepper, low calorie Dr. Pepper with red outline and white words, violet berries and cream Dr. Pepper, brown decal Dr. Pepper, and red striped cherry vanilla Dr. Pepper.

“Eh...” My throat just let out a strange sound, “So many types...?”

“It’s normally impossible to get them in Japan. Got to import them. We’re probably the only shop that provides all kinds of Dr. Pepper.”

That’s the reason? That’s why Alice would go “I’m willing to do anything for this shop”, that’s all?

My face reflected on the glass panel of the fridge just broke into an unnatural smile. How else can I react other than to laugh?

At this moment, the cellphone on my chest pocket vibrated, and the ‘Colorado Bulldog’ ringtone echoed.

“Narumi, you’re about to leave school now, right? Okabayashi just reopened today, so before coming over to the office.”

“Ahh, yeah. I’m at Tomozou-san’s place.”

I cut off Alice, who was talking faster and faster, unable to hide her elation. If I had relaxed, I probably would have burst out laughing.

“Really? Great! I want—”

“How many cans of each? You want all the types, right?”

“What’s with you? Did you get infected with an illness that made you smarter?”

Shut up. None of your business.

“So, one case of each flavor.”

“Wha!?”

“Don’t forget the receipt.”

She hung up.

Tomozou-san quickly brought out the cases from the storage.

“Cash...probably not. I can give you a receipt.”

“Pkay...please leave this on the tab.”

I was planning to buy some for her to drink, but I lost the mood.

“You can’t carry all these cases with you, right? Maybe when my mom comes back, she’ll deliver to you?”

“No, it’s fine. I can move them all.”

Tomozou-san widened his eyes in surprise. At this point, I just wanted to punish myself.

I stuffed a case of drinks into my backpack, and the others were barely tied down onto the rack. I supposed the weight of these drinks was probably 3 times Alice’s weight.

But someone’s waiting for them. This isn’t a bad feeling. Let’s keep this thought in mind.

So I convinced myself as I kicked the bicycle stand off, and pedalled hard.

Here Comes the Idiots of Justice

When hearing the term Yakuza, what would people associate it with? Guys with pompadours, bald heads, or a slick back haircut, savage looking eyes, light-colored sunglasses, always dressed in aloha shirts, strangely colored suits, or logo T-shirts all four seasons, and whenever the shoulders bumped, raise their eyebrows tauntingly. Well, that's how it seems, I guess.

But this is just the biased interpretation as depicted by TV and movies.

While I'm just studying in an ordinary prefecture high school, and would move on to being an ordinary sophomore—I don't know if it's fortunate of me or not, but loads of people I know are from the yakuza. I guess it's unfortunate that I can't be certain that I knew them...really unfortunate. I was often bailed out by them, and often helped them out, so I really did understand some bits about the yakuza no ordinary person would know of.

...I always wanted to write such a prologue, but such words isn't to give a trivia that 'the real yakuza won't dress so outlandishly to garner attention'. The yakuza I know of might be way different from the country's norm.

What I know of the yakuza, to be honest,

They're just a bunch of idiots.

Why do I know so many useless people at a mere age of sixteen? It's all because I started working part-time that Winter.

It's a bicycle ride no more than ten minutes from my house to my workplace. It's in a corner of a residential block, not too far away from the station, and I could see a cluster of shopping buildings standing amidst the skies above the city; next to a dead end alley with poor ventilation was a five-storey building. At the first storey, there was a ramen shop with a fancy looking red noren, a shop I

was very familiar with, called 'Hanamaru'. My workplace's at that very building, on the third storey. There are two days of summer vacation, but my employer wouldn't let me off the hook, so I had to hurry here on such a hot, sweltering day.

I parked my dear bicycle by the entrance of the shop, and slipped between the buildings. Scent of the chicken soup drifted from the kitchen, and filled the dim corners of the emergency staircase, forming what might be a distillation of the sweltering, relentless heat of later August. The heat waves on the asphalt were unbearable, and I really had the urge to head back home upon seeing that, but the consequences would be really dire if I did so. I reluctantly wiped my sweat away as I approached the stairs. At this moment, the back door of the ramen shop opened.

"Oh Narumi, you're here? Come here."

Poking her head out of her door was the big sister dressed in a tank top, an apron around her waist, hair tied in a ponytail, with a healthy looking appearance, and exposed shoulders. She's the owner of 'Ramen Hanamaru', and everyone called her 'Min-san'.

"Oh, go bring this to Alice."

"...Wait, is this the reason why I'm called over?"

"Probably."

I was seething, my shoulders shaking, but I received the tray from Min-san. Alice's living on the third floor of this building, and Min-san could have brought it to her. This Alice is my employer, a bonafide NEET, and would summon me for various trivial matters. Her pickiness of food and lack of appetite was also beyond expectations, so she would order stuff unbecoming of food, like ramen without noodles, or a Chinese bowl without rice. What did she order? So I wondered as I had a look at the bowl on the tray--and found nothing. I had to bring my face over to the bowl, and look intently.

...No, strictly put, it's not exactly nothing.

With a nonchalant look, Min-san said,

"She ordered salted butter ramen without ramen, butter, char siew, leek, seaweed and soup."

"That leaves the spring onions!"

"There's also salt you know?"

"This isn't the problem!."

I nearly flipped the bowl onto the concrete floor. Spring onions is food, and food shouldn't be wasted. But...

"I've been holding back on the various weird stuff Alice orders, but this is ridiculous! Salted butter ramen with no ramen, butter, char siew, leek, seaweed and soup. What the hell is that? That's basically getting a not-handsome poor, unknown guy from the streets whose wife isn't Shizuka Kudo and calling him Takuya Kimura! That's not Takuya Kimura, that's just an ordinary passer-by!"

The usually poised and decisive Min-san too was gobsmacked, her mouth agape as she stared at me.

"...Ehh, why are you so mad? Too hot? Hungry?"

"Not at all!"

"Don't get angry now. You can sing, have a nice face, and if you put on sunglasses and not say anything, you'll resemble Gackt."

"Gackt talks too!" Please don't console me with this weird way of putting it.

"Okay okay, enough yapping and bring this up."

I got beaten up.

"I too want her to eat something nutritious, but it seems she got heatstroke recently, and lack appetite."

"She got heatstroke...?"

It's true that it's so hot, breathing is an annoyance.

"If we can't get her to eat solid foods, her stomach might shrink and disappear. Better to have her eat spring onions than nothing now, right?"

Min-san patted me on the shoulder, returned to the kitchen, and closed the

door. I could only ascend the emergency staircase unwillingly.

There was a silver plate hanging on the door of the 8th room, level three. Written on the plate were the words 'NEET detective agency'. This room's the workplace of my employer, and her residence.

"Alice, I'm going in."

Recently, I had been used to entering without pressing the doorbell, and the moment I entered, there was a long, narrow corridor, with a kitchen to the right. The strong cold gusts blew in, immediately freezing the sweat on my body.

"It's so hot that I'm melting...uuu..."

The feeble voice of a girl came. The racks covering three walls reached the ceiling, and the various apparatus, including the computers, monitors and other devices were lined up upon them, the messy cables all curled out. There was also a bed in this bedroom filled with computers and cables, and this bed took up almost the entire floor space. A large number of dolls were scattered on the bedsheets, and a petite girl was buried under them. Her black hair was about as long as her height, and the slender arms exposed under the sleeves of her light blue pajamas laid weakly on the bed, together with the slender legs under the white stockings.

"Why do the seasons change so regularly? Because Hades always send his bride back to his in-laws obediently."

Alice lifted her head, grabbing the bedsheets as she uttered this ridiculous line.

"How about you migrate to the South Pole?"

"I don't want to! I'm not leaving this room at all. Bring the South Pole over to me!"

This pipsqueak of a pajamas girl hated the heat, and that's why she remained in this air-conditioned room all year, surfing the internet.

As indicated on the nameplate, she proclaimed herself as a 'detective', and I became the assistant to this detective. As for how this NEET functioned a

detective, I shall elaborate further later.

"Great...it's not like the South Pole can't be brought here..."

"What did you say?" Alice suddenly jolted, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Are you sure it's big enough to enter my room?"

"Yes, of course. It's a little different from the dolls you love...more like love dolls. Number 1, number 2."

Once I mentioned that, i really felt a sense of regret. Since when did I become the type of person to make dirty jokes? Alice did not know what I was talking about, and she tilted her head in confusion. Then, she tapped at the keyboard diagonally behind her, and began to search the internet.

With her face beetroot, she turned around--

"Narumi...you shameless cad!"

Following that were a large bunch of cans flying at me,

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I was joking!"

I had to bear the brunt of the concentrated fire, so that I could continue to be employed.

"I guess those two milligrams of things you were born with dropped in your diapers? How about you go retrieve them now!"

"Sorry! Seriously..."

I wanted to tease Alice, but she was completely agitated, her shoulders heaving as she huffed. After that, she landed on the bedsheets with a plomp.

"Seriously, what brought you here? If you're just here to make fun of me getting too hot, I shall terminate your employment right now! Scram!"

"You're asking me what am I here for? Aren't you the one who called me here, Alice?"

"I was calling for a responsible detective assistant! Not a high school kid who loves to make crude dirty jokes!"

"And that's why I apologized...brought your food too."

It's very unfortunate, but the main job of this detective assistant is to take care of Alice's dietary habits. Also, there's also the laundry and the housework. She's basically a Dr. Watson without a doctor's license, knowledge, social standing, and life experience. Wait, that's not Watson, that's just me! I told myself off as I put the bowl on the table. Alice, with black rings around her eyes, glared at me.

"Because of your uncouth actions. I have no energy to dine anymore!"

"...I see. How about I feed you? Here, open wide. Ahh--"

"Enough with such tomfoolery!"

Alice was so furious, her long hair was shaking as she snatched the spoon from me.

She chewed at the salt-coated spring onions, and there was a lonely sound echoing in the room. Is it...really nice to eat?

"Narumi, get me Dr. Pepper."

I was ordered to take out the dark red can from the refrigerator. She had no appetite, but she was still able to gulp down this disgusting carbonic drink. Her dietary needs really seemed to be based on Dr. Pepper itself.

"Phew--"

Once she cleared the contents of the bowl and the tin can, Alice let out a long sigh, and sank into the hill of dolls again.

"This body really does annoy me from time to time..."

She buried her chin in the blanket, muttering,

"I really wish i can become an electric signal swimming in the sea of the Net. There is no need for this physical body that is so feeble, and cranky.

"...But if that happens, I won't be able to meet you, Alice."

Alice widened her eyes, her lips remained pouted as she stared at me.

"No...what I mean is...even a NEET like you who doesn't step out of the house...do actually live here, and I'm able to meet you. It's not completely a bad thing now. Don't say something that lonely."

"Wh-what's with you? You sounded so frustrated when I called you."

"Hm, well, it's because it's too hot out there, and I didn't want to go out."

In fact, I wouldn't say that I hated to take care of this little detective who had zero survival skills.

"There's no reason for me to hate you, right? I'm your assistant after all."

I implied nothing else as I said this, but Alice's eyes went red as she retreated into the hill of dolls, showing only her head.

"...Y-you're saying that again?"

"Eh? So-sorry, did I say something i shouldn't have?"

"Even if it isn't something you shouldn't have said, there's something wrong with that! How do you not understand this!?"

Alice was so agitated, she knocked down the pile of dolls, and they fell off the bed.

"Think about what you say before talking, and take responsibility of what you say! You're not a talking robot!"

"E-erm? I'm not your assistant just because I like it or not. Besides, since I'm receiving pay, I'm really treating this as a job..."

"This has nothing to do with it! Whatever!"

Alice turned her back on me, and tapped at the keyboard like a shredder. I sighed, and placed the bowl back on the tray. In any case, I should shut up and quietly retreat. Better wait for Min-san to appease her with ice cream. The daily life of a detective's assistant ended just like this.

But the events on this day did not end. While I was about to head to the door, someone kept pressing the doorbell.

"Some rare guests we have."

Alice muttered as she stared at the six monitors lined side by side away from the bed. There were surveillance cameras all over this office, and she could identify the visitors according to the clear color visuals. Once I saw it, even I was taken aback.

I could not determine any face, and saw that it was completely dark. Immediately, I realized it was the torso of a black T-shirt, and understood who the visitors were despite not seeing their faces. Given the massive figure, it had to be him.

"Nee-san, coming in now!"

"We're coming in!"

I opened the door, and a booming voice rang. Entering the house and bowing deeply was a guy 2m tall, along with another obese enough to block the door. Their chests, shoulders and arms were filled with massive muscles, nearly ripping the black T-shirts apart.

"Aniki, you're here too?"

"Hello! Good work!"

Once they noticed me standing at the door, the two of them bowed to me, as though delivering headbutts.

"Be quiet when you come by next time! My office is a sanctuary!"

"Apologies for this, ane-san!"

"We'll keep that in mind!"

They ended up louder than when they entered. After much reflection, they knelt down at the floor before the kitchen.

The tall guy was Pole, and the fat one was Rocky. Those were what I called them by (and speaking of which, I never knew of their actual names). As for why they call Alice 'nee-san', and me as 'aniki'.

"Well, the office is a mess without Sou-san around. The landlord even said that if the gang leader isn't around, they won't pay the protection fees..." Pole wiped away the sweat on his forehead.

"Yeah...are they looking down on us? Aniki, we need you to go around everywhere and tell off these guys!" Rocky said, his saliva spouting everywhere.

These two guys are members of the yakuza.

The Sou-san (or Yondaime as we call him) they speak of had gathered a bunch

of delinquents off the streets, and formed this 'Hirasakagumi'. Normally, the gangs comprised of city kids would have some western-sounding name, but these guys just love their chivalry, gang rules, and brotherhood. They spent a lot of effort imitating the yakuza.

Alice and I are acquaintances of their gang leader, Sou-san, or Yondaime as we call him, and that's why we were given such respect, which was unsettling to us.

"If you are here to grumble, I can loan you the toilet to puke into."

Alice glared at them indifferently as she spat back. I supposed I should follow up here.

"Erm, well, did something happen? Yondaime's still in the hospital, and I'm still not very sure of what's going on here, so I might not be able to help..."

The gang leader they speak of was heavily injured in a previous incident. As for what happened then, I suppose I should talk about it next time."

"Yes! It's a situation where nee-san and aniki have to save us right now."

Pole's words caused Alice and I to exchange looks. While I was wondering that it was a bad thing, Rocky then followed up, "The computer can't connect to the internet."

At that moment, Alice's eyes became so cold, I felt that in the next thirty years, the world did not need any air conditioning.

"You could have left such a crude issue to that uncouth, uncivilized assistant of mine! I have more important things to do."

There were some ice speckles mixed in Alice's voice, and I sighed. Well, I can sorta understand her reason..

"Eh...I understand, but you could have just given me a call here, right?"

"No no, how can we ask both of you to drop by...?"

"That's why we brought the computer here!"

Rocky started taking it out from under his T-shirt. "...Why did you bring it here! And how am I supposed to deal with just the monitor? It's so hot out

there, and you put it on your stomach and brought it here? What are you thinking...?"

"Isn't it better for a computer to be warmer? And it's always hot anyway..."

"Both of you, kneel down to the pioneers of the computer world, starting with Claude Shannon! Heating a computer is a cardinal sin!" Alice was so furious, she was seething.

"Sorry, Shannon-san."

"Sorry."

"And I figured out why you can't use the internet. You never paid the bills!"

With a hand on my forehead, I sighed. I see. Yondaime had been hospitalized through the end of the month...couldn't he have set it to auto transfer?

"So it's not broken? As to be expected.of nee-san. We spent two hours wondering, smacking it, and it wouldn't work, yet you figured out the reason immediately."

"Don't hit it." What happens if it actually breaks down?

It's not worth coming all the way here just to settle this, so the anxious duo immediately hurried back. Feeling a little worried, I stood behind Rocky, and asked, "So, are you able to reconnect the cables?"

"Don't worry!" Rocky confidently showed me the back of the computer, "We wrote 'black' on all the ports in permanent marker.

"...Why black?"

"Because all the cables are black!"

"...Then it's pointless to remember them like that now, right?"

"Ahh, you're right!" "As expected of you, aniki!"

As expected, my foot! What did these idiots eat to become this stupid!?

*

And as expected, I had to head down to Hirasakagumi's office to connect the

computer. If I let those brawny idiots in black T-shirts do this on their own, they might end up connecting the internet cable into the power port.

Thinking back about it, that was the start of the incident that ruined my last two days of summer vacation.

The Hirasakagumi office was located in a shorter building, behind the office block next to the nearby train station. I leaned over to the letter box, and saw bills from various enterprises. The gang's like this all because the leader wasn't around until the end of the month. Seriously, it doesn't sound like that guy trusts the bank automated transactions.

I was about to turn around and head upstairs, only to be reminded of something.

"You haven't paid rental for the office, right?"

"Yes, only Sou-san gets to use the money."

I guess. So I brought Pole and Rocky to the back. I heard the owner of this building once opened a shop on the first floor, but I didn't see the shutters rolled up. I guess the owner had been living on rental income. Better apologize to her.

"Oh? Isn't this, the leader's replacement?"

A lively looking middle-aged woman came to answer the door. Jinnai-san, the lady landlord, seemed to have known who I was despite me not talking with her.

"Rental? Well, it's fine. A few days won't matter. I heard the gang leader is hospitalized now. He certainly has it tough too."

"We're sorry, owner!"

"We'll definitely pay immediately if we can, but we don't have any money on us now. We're really sorry."

Pole and Rocky stood by my left and right, shouting.

"Ah yeah, do you mind giving a gift to the owner? It's not something valuable, but it should be pretty good for the body."

And the aunty went back into the house, returning soon after with korean ginseng marinated in honey.

"...Eh, no. We can't really accept something this pricey, right?"

"It's fine. I haven't been able to open the shop ever since my waist been aching. I wanted to have my daughter manage it. She said she wanted to open a convenience store too."

Since she said so, I really couldn't really.

"Thank you very much, owner!"

"Thank you very much!"

We came to apologize and explain our reasons for the late payment, only to be given a get-well gift. All three of us bowed profusely, and unexpectedly, the landlord kept bringing out what should be some really pricey Chinese medicine.

"No no no. We really can't accept this."

"My my, don't worry about that."

And while both of us remained in an impasse, our savior arrived on the corridor.

"Mum, if you give that many gifts, the ward room can't really store that much, right? Also, it's not easy to bring them all there at one go."

Walking out of the door was a big sister dressed in a blue camisole and a really short white miniskirt. I remember she's called Kaori-san, and she's the landlord's daughter. As they watched her put on her shoes, I hurried Pole and Rocky out of the house. The two large guys were obstructing the corridor.

"How long will Sou-kun be hospitalized?"

Kaori-san, who was heading out, asked.

"The doctor said it'll be two months for complete recovery, but Sou-san is immortal."

"So he'll be back in a week."

"Ahaha he's the same as usual. Since he isn't around, nobody's in charge of cleaning and tidying, right? Do you need me to help us?"

"No no no no, thank you for that."

I hastily refused her. This had to be handled by the gang itself.

"We have a really reliable substitute gang leader. No problems."

Pole answered as he grinned at me. So your substitute gang leader is in charge of cleaning the place?

"Substitute gang leader? Are you that amazing? Well, speaking of which, aren't you still studying in high school? It's one thing to get involved with the yakuza, but you might dropout if you don't study well, just as I did."

Kaori-san tapped at my forehead. I had to remember these words well.

As I returned to the stairs, Pole and Rocky were musing,

"That mother and daughter are both really kind people."

"They didn't hate useless people like us..."

Seriously, if I were the landlord, I would have chased you guys out. So I thought as I opened the door to the gang office on the third floor.

"Good work, aniki!"

I entered the reception room of the office, and the burly guys in black T-shirts, who were lazing around there, got up in unison and bowed to me. I really disliked them doing this every time, beside the fact that they were all older than me.

We passed through the idiots, and entered the library cum restroom cum PC room. Did they not clean up the place without their leader around, as Kaori-san had said? There's cardboard boxes on the bed, and half-emptied PET bottles on the shelves. It's a mess. Well, whatever, I'll clean up later. I moved aside the trash on the table, and started attaching the cables of the computer again.

"Amazing! As to be expected of you! Godlike!"

"One right hand and you managed to connect it!"

"And you didn't need to read the instructions!"

Shut up! If you have time to make noise, start cleaning up!

And so, nobody looked like they wanted to take action. After connecting the cables, I ended up cleaning the room myself.

I was clearing up the books in the room, only to hear the telephone ring outside. I then opened the door, poking my head out, and found that Pole picked up the call. Is he alright? If the office receives a call, it's probably work-related, right?

"...Hello! Huh? Yeah, this is Jinnai Building."

Jinnai Building, the name of this office building. Once he heard the reply, Pole gave a grim look.

"That woman's voice...what's going on? Who are you?"

I was taken aback, got the other black shirted guys to quiet, approached the phone, and started recording.

"...Our daughter? Bed? Nee-san, you mean? Hey! What do you want to do to her!? What...five million? You got to joking you bas...no, wait...shut up...hey, you're going to hang up now? If you dare touch a hair on nee-san, I'm not going to forgive you!"

With everyone listening to this conversation with bated breath, I saw Pole slam the phone down hard.

"Nee-san got abducted!"

Pole looked around at everyone, declaring this.

"What!?" "Who did it!? Looking down on us, eh?"

"5 million yen ransom?"

I stood amongst the chattering gang, and was left speechless. Alice—was kidnapped? No, wait a moment, you guys, let me calm down first. I was trapped in the vortex of rage as I took out my cellphone.

"...Ahh, Alice? Erm, well."

I thought it was too stupid to ask, but I had to be certainly.

"You're not, erm, kidnapped, are you?"

“What nonsense are you saying now?”

I could hear the utterly bewildered voice of the detective from the other end of the call, and sighed.

“Alice got kidnapped? For real?”

A muscular big brother couldn’t contain his excitement as he barged into the Hirasakagumi office. It’s Tetsu-senpai, who used to study at my high school. He kept training at the level of a sportsman every day, yet his job was a pachinko pro. In other words, he’s a NEET. Tetsu-senpai would occasionally assist Alice in the investigations, and he’s part of the detective team.

“Good work, ojiki!!”

“Good work!”

Tetsu-senpai was old friends with the leader of Hirasakagumi, Yondaime, so the gang would call him respectful. Unlike me however, he could accept the respect without flinching.

“I went over to the ramen shop, and heard Alice say “Was I kidnapped?”. I thought it was interesting, so I dropped by.”

“No, erm. This isn’t a joke. Seems like someone really got kidnapped.”

Tetsu-senpai remained bemused as he sat on the desk. I played the phone recording, and midway through, senpai could not help but smirk. It’s no wonder however.

This was the call.

“...Your daughter is already with us here. Listen up. Don’t call the police. If you make noise to the police, everything she did on the bed will be made known.”

“...Our daughter? Bed? Nee-san, you mean? Hey! What do you want to do to her!?”

“...Y-you’re not her father, but her brother? Yeah! Anyway, this woman is with

me here, and you heard her, right...ahhh, you're noisy there. Tell them to shut up. Listen up, I want 5 million. You can get it ready immediately, right?"

"What...five million? You got to joking you bas..."

"You don't care if she remains alive or not?"

"No, wait...shut up. Damn it, I get it."

"Hey, I'm the kidnapper here. Can't you show some courtesy here?"

"Shut up."

"Whatever, just prepare the money first. I'll call again later."

"...Hey, you're going to hang up now? If you dare touch a hair on nee-san, I'm not going to forgive you!"

"How did this weird conversation go so well anyway?"

Once he was done listening, senpai burst out laughing.

"The second call reached us too..."

The culprit called for Pole to be in charge of the transaction, along with the location and time. Tetsu-senpai nearly fell off the table, laughing, "Erm, but, this probably isn't a joke. Seems like someone really got kidnapped."

"Speaking of which, I did hear a woman's scream, but it definitely didn't sound like Alice."

Now that he mentioned it, that's true.

"And how did they manage to continue the conversation even after the mistake? Didn't they check the name the first time around?"

"Ah, yeah, is this the Jinnais, he asked. So Pole answered, yeah, this is 'Jinnai Building'."

"This is probably where the misunderstanding started."

Senpai tilted his head in confusion.

"The first floor of this building always has its shutters down, but it's actually a medicine distributor managed by the landlord. Her name is Jinnai."

"So, the one kidnapped is her daughter?"

Soon after, I got a call from Alice.

"So what's the situation now? Explain clearly now. What is the misunderstanding, and how did it happen? How did the abduction of a non-blood related woman involve you guys?"

"All for justice, nee-san! We can't just ignore this." "Kaori-san and the landlord always took care of us, how can you say they aren't related?"

Pole and Rocky shouted at the phone from both sides. I had to shoo them off before explaining to Alice, "Well, it seems the one that made the mistake was the kidnapper."

It seemed he didn't know the Jinnais' number, and had to search by address and building name, and ended up calling the third floor, where the Hirasakagumi office was.

"Such an unbelievable mistake."

"What happened after that was more unbelievable."

"Why didn't those heroes of justice shouting away behind you call the police directly? Did they continue to bluff the kidnapper?"

"As you guessed..."

"They didn't inform the Jinnais?"

"That's how it is..."

Alice, usually snappy with her retorts, was immediately left speechless. I too was shocked as I had just known about it, but I had to explain to Alice, "Erm, as for why they didn't ask the police, the kidnapper asked for it, actually. And as for how Kaori-san was kidnapped, it's said that she went to a hotel after a call was made, and they took her off like that."

"Uh huh."

"So in other words, Kaori-san's job is actually, well, that kind of a unique massage work."

"I do know of Delivery Health services. You don't have to put it in a roundabout manner."

"Ah, so you heard of it? Sorry. That Number 1 and Number 2 thing to the South Pole became sexual harassment, so I'm kinda sensitive about it."

"So in other words, they're wondering that if things get out of hand, the kidnapped woman's job as a prostitute will be known to all? Seriously, always with the chivalry in such unnecessary areas, just like you."

It really hurt me gravely to be compared to the Hirasakagumi.

"I have a rough idea of what's going on now. I thought nobody will be bluffed into ransom at this day and age when it's high risk low reward. So he guessed they wouldn't call the police."

"Well I thought it'll be better to call the police directly..."

"I feel the same. Even if the police is to handle this, and if news of this made it to the media, they won't actually report everything about the victim, including her profession. The culprit's too naive to think he can hold her reputation as hostage."

"No! It'll be really shocking if the landlord knows that her kin is secretly doing this kind of thing!"

"Yeah! Aniki, if you know Alice nee-san is secretly doing such things, won't you be shocked?"

"H-how can I possibly do such a thing? Anyone with such imagination should just worry about their future that's bleaker than a desert on the moon!"

Alice's growl entered my ears. Also, Pole and Rocky, stop sticking so close to my face!

"And so? Are you going to help them? Leaving aside your duty as an assistant?"

"Hm, got no choice but to carry on here...Alice, erm...you're not going to help, right?"

"If an official request is made with payment, I am willing to accept this as a job. To preface, searching by GPS signal will take lots of time, and won't

guarantee success, so even if we can't find her, I do demand payment for the job. "

This NEET detective's best weapon is her outstanding hacking skills. She can read into the GPS signal or cell site through external means, and can lock into that position immediately to solve this kidnapping case. Who's going to pay up for this stupid case though?

Since you can't pay, forget about it. Alice blurted as she hung up on me.

No choice here. Including Tetsu-senpai, everyone else's a fighter, and couldn't do any information gathering.

Got to ask Hiro.

"Sounds interesting here."

An hour later, Hiro said as he entered the office. He was dressed in a fitting suit of rough texture, his smile so refreshing on his boyish looks, and as he entered, he seemed to have blown aside the steam in the small reception room full of guys dressed in black T-shirts.

"I'll go ask the women I know of. Probably can get a clue there."

Hiro took out his four cellphones and shook them about. This guy has the aura of an actor, or model, or even a host, but he's actually a gigolo who leeches on women everywhere, and a NEET. Like Tetsu-senpai, he's a member of the detective team who goes about doing investigations.

"Good work, ojiki!"

"Good work!"

It seemed this greeting was already customary to them. Hiro noticed Pole and Rocky, and burst into laughter.

"What's with the nametags?"

"Righto, I'm acting as the hostage's little brother, in charge of picking the call!"

On the chest of Pole's 'T-shirt' was a 'Jinnai's little brother' card. It was made

out of torn cardboard.

"I'm in charge of negotiations."

On Rocky's chest was the card 'gonetiator'. He's probably hoping to do the job of negotiating with the culprit, I guess? He's too pitifully stupid that I couldn't retort saying that it should be 'negotiator'.

"And then? Why the 'SAT' on Tetsu?"

"Of course it's to break in when we find the culprit. Seems like I'm the leader too." Tetsu-senpai flicked at his nametag, grimacing.

"On Tetsu ojiki's orders, we'll charge in after him!"

"We're going to wipe out the culprit!"

"He dare to kidnap the landlord's daughter. How can we let him leave alive!?"

The black T-shirts around me were all riled up, and I really wanted to let this be and go home already, but for some reason, I had the nametag 'chief inspector' on me. Hiro saw me, and laughed it off. Please, just comment on this.

It's an abduction, but why is the mood so relaxed? Thinking about it--

First off, the kidnapper sounded really young. When Pole sounded a little menacing on the call, the culprit clearly sounded rattled. It seemed he's no less an idiot than these Hirasakagumi guys, and didn't seem like he'll be the type to hurt Kaori-san. Also, whenever the kidnapper called, I could hear Kaori-san, or a woman at least, screaming stuff like 'untie me', 'I need the toilet', 'don't do anything stupid and let me go already'.

There wasn't any tension at all, either because something did happen, or that she's still save.

"What? You don't seem enthusiastic about this, Narumi-kun."

Hiro sat down on the sofa, asking me. He was so composed, it was annoying.

"Has the kidnapper made any demands at this point?"

"Yes! I gonetiated about ransom during the third phone call."

Rocky said proudly.

"I agreed to 2 million."

"We can't possibly pay 2 million now, right? Looks like we have to find the place and save her."

The other members of this temporary SAT team nodded.



"Jinnai Kaori-san...right? I did check on her before. She does work at a sexual massage services parlor called 'Tokyo Nameco Club'. Her alias is Yuuka."

A few calls to his acquaintances, some casual mentions, and he got far more Intel than us. This guy's intel network of women on the streets is really not to be underestimated.

"Now we can find the culprit quickly." Tetsu-senpai said, "We're going to find her today. This is too easy."

"Not really. It's not that easy to find information on her customers."

"She's working at a sexy massage parlor. Beat them up and they'll confess right away!"

"Absolutely not. The people at the parlor have nothing to do with this. We can't cause them trouble here."

Pole was told off by Hiro, and was really dejected. I too was wondering if I should hand over the 'chief inspector' tag to him.

"If Alice was willing to investigate where the call came from, we would have settled this immediately."

"But we can't hire nee-san even with all the money we have!"

With that, Tetsu-senpai immediately looked towards me, followed by Hiro, who wanted to say something, but didn't. After them, the gang looked towards me. Hey! What are you thinking? What are you hoping for? Don't do this to me man!

"Erm, but I don't have an idea here."

"If you're willing to ask, nee-san will be willing to do anything, right?"

"Yeah. If you speak up, aniki, she might be glad to..."

"Because nee-san obeys you all the time, aniki."

"Me? No no no, what are you saying? Alice never listens to me, you know? Wait a moment, Hiro. What do you know? It's pointless to just smile and pat me on the shoulder."

Even Tetsu-senpai pat me on my other shoulder, giving me a thumbs up too.

“Enough already, just coax her like usual. Isn’t this your specialty?”

Can you stop talking like I’m a con man already? I care about this!

“How is it possible to ask Alice to investigate without us paying up?”

“So your job is to think of a way to get her to investigate for free, since you’re the detective’s assistant.”

What do you think a detective assistant is? What’s impossible is impossible.

“Guess we got no choice but to do our own investigations. So then...I’ll look for the landlord, and act as though nothing happen while asking about her daughter.”

Saying that, Hiro got to his feet.

“Then I’ll think of Hiro’s nametag. What’s good?” Tetsu-senpai said. Aren’t you guys going to work or something?”

“How about CIA? Ojiki’s intel is great.”

“Do you know how to write CIA?”

“It’s short for Completely Innovative Assumption!”

That’s not hour it works! No, this isn’t the problem! I could only feel ashamed for quietly retorting at others and at myself. I really couldn’t remain where I was, so I grabbed the nametag, and followed Hiro out of the office.

“Eh? You’re coming along too, Narumi-kun?”

“Staying here for long will get me infected with idiocy.”

It’s cruel to say that, but it’s undoubtedly what I thought. Hearing that, Hiro chuckled as he went down the stairs. Of course, it’s best not to alarm the landlord when hearing from her. Should we explain that her daughter was kidnapped? Surely she will call the police.

“I just had a talk with Major. He’s really excited, moving all his equipment here now.”

Major’s another member of the NEET detective group. Seriously, is everyone this free?

“I say, aren’t the detective members hardboiled? I thought you guys won’t take action if there’s no request, right?”

“Not at all? This doesn’t seem like a huge case. They were able to haggle to two million on the third call, you know? The kidnapper seem amateurish. Might be a student even.”

“So, you’re just fooling around, Hiro...”

“Yes yes.”

How am I supposed to be motivated for this?

“So Hiro, you can be the chief inspector.”

I stuffed the nametag that was in my fist to Hiro’s chest pocket.

“I’m not suited to be a controlling mastermind here. You’re more suited, Narumi-kun.”

“I don’t want to do this either!”

“As for me, chatting with women happily is the only thing I know.”

And so I immediately realized that he didn’t just ‘know’ that thing.

“Oh my, Hiro-kun, you’re here? Plenty of candidates today. A party?”

The landlord aunty hurried out to welcome us. They met only once or twice, and she still remembers Hiro?

This time, she treated us differently from when Pole and Rocky visited. We were welcomed into her living room. This is the first phase of a lady killer.

“I heard you gave lots of get well gifts to Yondaime. I haven’t sent anything to him, but I’ll like to give you a gift in return.”

It’s really amazing how he immediately thought of a reason to visit. He even had it prepared beforehand.

“It’s embroidery from Yondaime himself. It’s, well, the cover used for the toilet paper roll.”

“Wow! It’s pretty! That gang leader’s really great at handicrafts. Can I really

accept this?"

"I guess females pay more attention to these little things, right? Since the Hirasakagumi is full of guys, it's unusable even after he made this. Your household is full of ladies, and the windows are clean and comfy looking. The office's been hot and sweaty, so I hope to visit if possible, is that alright?"

"Absolutely, any time. Since my husband died, Kaori and I were the only ones left, and it's been quiet here...this won't be the case if she had a brother, but unfortunately, Kaori's an only child. The more the merrier."

"Eh? Oh, yes. I don't see Kaori-san anywhere. Does she have work? Isn't it a rest day?"

"Yes...that child often goes out to do massages. Ever since I hurt my hip, she found this job where she could accompany me at home. Heard the pay's good. She really helped me out."

Seeing how Hiro easily diverted the topic to the landlord's daughter, I felt really conflicted. Kaori-san started working in the sex industry because of this? What will become of aunty if she knows the truth?

Maybe Pole and Rocky's worry was valid. I thought we could have left it to the police. Thinking about it, it was really embarrassing.

"But, soon after, our house will be really lively."

The landlord suddenly sounded cheery.

"Kaori's getting married this year, to a Mitsuo-san. Do you know the company Mitchell Toys? He's the president there."

I was shocked, and turned to Hiro. The latter didn't show a change of expression, his eyes on the landlord, but he obviously fidgeted forward.

"I heard it's a company that imports cute groceries from Sweden and other countries. I did visit it once, and they had some decent shops in Tokyo. Mitsuo-san had discussed with Kaori to renovate the first floor of this building along with our house, to become their shop."

I see, so this is why. So I thought.

The culprits probably knew this. This would be the biggest reason why the

police couldn't get involved.

That chairman would know of his fiancee's kidnapping, and would want to know the reason for that. With that, Jinnai Kaori's real job would be exposed.

That reality might actually result in their marriage annulled.

"Kaori always dreamed of having her own shop...such a nice fellow she met. Mitsuo-san even asked if I was willing to stay with them."

As I saw the landlord mutter dreamily, I felt an uneasy chill, and could only keep my head lowered, staring at my knees.

"I did say I'm doing this for fun, but it's embarrassing to reflect on it."

As we left the Jinnais' and returned to the third floor, Hiro muttered on the staircase.

"No matter how trivial and foolish this case is, a person's happiness can still be crushed. To think I actually forgot about this."

Actually, I too had forgotten. The balance of kindness, malice and desires on this world remained so delicate.

No matter how silly it might seem to the onlookers, everyone did their best, Jinnai Kaori, the Hirasakagumi, and even those foolish kidnappers.

"Erm, Hiro."

On the landing between the second and third level, I spoke up as I faced the back dressed in leather suit. Hiro stopped in his tracks, and turned back to look at me. Though he wasn't smiling, his eyes appeared to have seen through my intentions, or it was just my own self-victimizing delusion.

But even so, it required a lot of courage to convert my feelings into words.

"...Please return me the nametag."

Hearing my eyes, Hiro answered with a sincere smile.

"Understood, chief inspector."

...It really sounds embarrassing. Can you please stop calling me that!?

6pm, and Major, the last to show up, appeared in the Hirasakagumi office that had become his search HQ.

“Great air. With the atmosphere of the old Japanese army headquarters.”

This little babyface of a guy, dressed in camouflage army attire, opened the metal doors and said so as he looked around at everyone. He might look like an elementary school kid, but he’s a college engineering student. He’s a military nerd through and through, so everyone called him Major instead of his actual name.

“I’ve basically analysed the recording.”

Major took his earphones out from his backpack, and shook it about.

“There should be three culprits.”

“You can tell?”

I was really impressed. Major’s the gadget expert amongst the NEET detective team, and he’s able to decipher loads of information through a single, simple phone recording.

Behind the male caller, I could hear anyone one yelling at the woman to shout up, the woman’s voice, and another one who got scolded. I couldn’t hear any other voices. It’s been the same all three times, no doubt about it.”

“Three’s easy to deal with. Let’s hurry up to beat them up.”

Tetsu-senpai’s words aside, even I had the urge to do the same. The culprits were already impatient, and so were us.

“Know where it is?” Major asked.

“Probably a hotel room. They called for service, and locked her in the room, I guess?”

A short time transpired from the moment Kaori-san left home, to the first call from the culprits. That’s the only possibility.

“Not to their houses?”

“No, that’s impossible.” Hiro continued. “That service provider only accepts

business in hotels, and I guess it's somewhat a mix of a hotel delivery and health delivery. It's so that the girls can work at ease."

"Hmm, so it's unlikely a love hotel can accommodate three guys. Probably a city hotel. That narrows things down a lot."

Major sat next to Hiro, and officially began discussing the details.

"But anyone can hire that Delivery Health service within all the three zones of Tokyo, right?" I started to ask, "We can't determine where the place is now."

It'll take us days to search through all the hotels in Tokyo.

"Is there nothing else about the culprits? Those guys know the hostage very well, right? There should be one who knows her, at least. Can't we begin investigations from there?" Tetsu-senpai asked.

I folded my arms before my chest, and went into deep thought.

As Hiro said, this case wouldn't have happened if the culprits didn't understand the hostage well. Surely they had to know Kaori-san engaged in sexual services, that her job was to head off from her home to the designated location, that they knew she was going to get married, or they wouldn't have chosen her.

The problem is, chasing this lead would be too much time.

"Amazing, aniki, you guys are talking at a really high level..."

"I don't get what they're talking about..."

I could hear chatter from the black T-shirts gathered at the wall.

"Anyway, we're just in charge of barging in and beating people up."

"Can you let us go in faster?"

"Ah, about this."

I suddenly thought of something, and had to explain, so I turned towards Pole and Rocky.

"Even if we do figure out where they are, it's better to have fewer people go in to save Kaori-san. If possible, Tetsu-senpai alone should be enough."

“Aniki, that not good enough!”

“Why? You’re saying we’re useless here?”

Yeah. You guys figured that out?

“We wanted to wreck that hotel too!”

“We want to beat those three into minced meat!”

“What I’m saying is that you guys can’t do that!”

Without thinking, I started yelling.

“If things get out of hand, what if the hotel staff reports to the police!?”

The black T-shirts were deflated.

Our objective here was so that aunty Jinnai wouldn’t be too worried as the mother, and solve this incident without knowing that her daughter’s kidnapped. But even so, the situation wouldn’t allow for us to orchestrate and take action. The landlord will still worry if her daughter doesn’t return home in time, and might even call for the police. On the service side, they might get suspicious if they can’t contact Kaori-san.

We had to settle this quickly. In that case.

I got up from the chair at the table, and picked up the chief inspector nametag. What are you going to do now? Hiro seemed to have sensed something for now.

“Back to being a detective’s assistant?”

“Just for a moment. Please stay guard here.”

I got onto the bicycle, and raced back to ‘Ramen Hanamaru’. The sun had just set, and the heat gathered upon my skin like flies. I cycled into the cool area of the building, and the sweat stuck onto me, making me feel greasy. Even so, I hurried up the emergency stairs, to the third floor, and took no time to catch my breath.

“Got the money?”

I hurried into the office, and that was the first thing Alice said.

“...How did you know I’ve come to make a request?”

“My assistant who’s always fooling around suddenly runs up the stairs, panting like mad, so I can guess what he wants me to do. Hiro just happened to make a call, and explained what has happened, even though we weren’t actually requested.”

“So you’re waiting for me? Great.”

“Who said I’m waiting for you? Listen to me already, will you?”

Alice suddenly hopped off the bedsheets, and stared at me. I got to the bedside, grabbed the bedframe, and slowly approached her.

“Eh, I really can’t get the money for this. Really, I can’t ask you?”

I was slowly closing in on Alice, and she appeared a little intimidated as she backed away, though still pretending to be uncooperative.

“What now? Are you intending to use your pay as a detective’s assistant to pay in instalments? If you dare have such intentions, I will set it at high interest and have you chase after debt for eternity—”

“Ahh, no, erm, that’s not what I mean. You know the Mitchell Toys company? It’s a company that imports groceries, it seems.”

For a moment, Alice looked stunned, and then, she instinctively reached her hands for the keyboard, and started searching the internet. “The one abducted, Kaori-san, is going to be married to the boss, it seems. Once they’re done, they’re going to start up shop at the first floor of the Hirasakagumi office.”

“...And, so?”

It appeared all the pretentious spite she had in her tone was long gone.

“They do import dolls from Northern Europe. Heard that other shops can’t get them. Isn’t it convenient if there’s one such shop here?”

The little face of the NEET detective betrayed various emotions, which then vanished. Without waiting for the changes to change, I continued on, “But, if Kaori-san’s fiancé knows that she does special services, that shop might not

open. Better save her before anyone knows about it.”

Alice’s cheeks were flushed, as she angrily puffed her cheeks.

“...Such a cheap taunt. To think that you will actually do such a despicable thing. I’ve seen it all now.”

Sorry, erm, but, we’re not treating you as a fool here, Alice. I can’t bring myself to see the landlord being unhappy.”

“Whatever.”

Alice turned her back on me, and kept typing at her keyboard. The long black hair covered her face and her petite body completely. I sighed. Was it too much too think it would end up perfectly? Leaving aside this time, I did owe her a favor, and that’s why I’m still working as her detective assistant, to slowly repay the debt.

Well, no choice but to search the city hotels here through human wave tactics, I guess. Can we make it in time? So I thought as I intended to head for the door, but— “The phone the culprits used belongs to a college boy called Matsunaga Kouta, who’s probably one of them. They’re near the Hirasakagumi office, and might have encountered JinnaiKaori.”

I turned my head around abruptly, and nearly slipped and fell, before I hurriedly supported myself off the kitchen floor.

“...Eh? What?”

“There’s no GPS function on the phone, so I could only investigate the data in the cell site. This alone allows me to secure a range and find the hotels they might be hiding in, I guess. I sent the data to Hirasakagumi.”

“...You investigated beforehand? You could have said so, you know?”

“I just found this.”

Alice hastily turned her head around, her long hair overflowing.

“But didn’t you say it’ll take a long time to check the call logs?”

“Your brain is smoother than the cross-section of a Mica, yet why do you keep remembering this fine details? It doesn’t matter, right? Scram back to the office

and perform your role as chief inspector.”

Hiro, you informed her of this embarrassing thing? But it doesn’t matter. All I felt a burning elation at the bottom of my belly, like liquor.

“Eh, erm, thanks Alice.”

“No need to thank me. Listen up, when that shop opens up, use that slick tongue of yours to gain a favour from Jinnai Kaori. A Cadillac of Northern Europe dolls. I’m not going to work for charity.

“...Yeah, got it.”

“And anyway, once the hostages are rescued, the culprits will be left to Hirasakagumi, right?”

“Yeah, should be.”

We couldn’t leave them to the police, so the gang had to punish them instead.

“I want something then.”

“...What/”

“The phone the culprits used to contact you.”

“Phone? Why?”

“A few doubtful points here. I want to know the answer.”

Doubtful points?

It’s just a case of an idiotic bunch of kidnappers who just happened to make a wrong call to an idiotic bunch of yakuza, and we’re going to end this?

Alice looked at me, and shook her head wordlessly.

“That phone might be the crux behind this. We can’t know the full truth without getting that.”

With those words, I as the detective assistant couldn’t say anything more. The detective knew more than anyone else the pain of words, whether they were the sour, unpleasant truths, or the bitter lies.

So, until all the mysteries are solved, the detective can only reject the

assistant's doubts with the line that was practically carved in stone.

"I can't say yet."

Thus, I could only leave the office quietly. I descended the stairs, and gave Major a call.

"...It's me. Received it yet? Let's start investigating. Also, tell all members not to do anything once we find them. Yeah, got it. Please."

I folded the phone, slipped it back into my pocket, and hopped onto the bicycle. The wind got chilly after the sun set, but my body was getting increasingly hotter.

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I returned back to the office, explained the situation to everyone, and Rocky spoke up.

"I know that Matsunaga!"

Next to him, Pole nodded.

"I know him too!"

"Yea yeah. He said he wanted to join us Hirasakagumi."

"Eh...when was that?"

I looked over at the gang's faces. The detective team trio and most of the gang was on the streets, starting to search for the hideout, while I had to do the intel gathering and sorting myself.

"He came by quite a few times."

"He came by once last month. Sou-san said he wouldn't accept students, but that Matsunaga wouldn't listen."

"He said that if he joined us, he won't get bullied."

"Some casual bastard he is."

"He even brought a resume here. We're a gang, not a part-time service company."

One of the gang members went into the study, and rummaged around. Feeling curiously, I saw him take out a paper of B4 sized paper. A resume, of all things. Matsunaga Kouta in the photo seemed like the weak nerdy student, and though I can't say it's impossible for him to abduct someone, he didn't seem like the type. Even at his reasons for wanting to be hired, he wrote, 'I really admire seeing everyone so carefree when working in the office'. Actually, he's just implicitly saying that the gang members are all idiots, right?

"Hm, so, he came by this building lots of times?"

In that case, the person who really knew about Kaori-san's background was that Matsunaga Kouta?

"Definitely!"

"So he's not just a stalker?"

"Yeah. If he gets to come into this office, he might approach Kaori-san without raising suspicion here."

Stalker, that's one possibility. Might even explain how he knows about Kaori-san's background so well, yet did that stupid mistake.

"But the one who called isn't Matsunaga, you know?" Pole quizzed. "The voice's different."

"That guy doesn't seem like he has the guts. Probably got someone else to use his phone, I guess?"

"Yeah. He doesn't seem like the type to be a mastermind."

At that moment, the phone in the office rang. The tension in the room escalated. I gave Pole a look, and wordlessly informed him the ransom wasn't raised yet.

"...Hello? Jinnai here."

"Is the 2 million ready?"

The culprit's voice came from the speakers. I put on the headphones, and listened attentively to the background noises for any possible clues.

"No, not yet. Not that fast. Next week at least..."

“Hey. Stop joking around. This woman sent all the money she earned from her ero massages home, right? She should have two million on hand anytime, right?”

I bit my lips. He asked such things too? No wonder he was being so forceful. Seeing that Pole’s veins were popping, I hurriedly raised my hand to stop him, “Tell him the excess money was stored as fixed deposits.” and wrote on the notebook to him.

“The money’s used for fixed deposits. I—”

“Huh? You haven’t informed the parents, right? It’s a waste of time talking to you now, damn it!”

Argh. Should I bluff him saying that the parents aren’t around? But if they had investigated beforehand, it’ll be seen through surely. What do I do? I kept thinking, and the culprit sounded more vicious.

“Hey, don’t think we’ll just wait!”

The next moment, the woman’s scream stung at my ears, and I instinctively removed the earphones.

“What did you do!” Pole yelled at the receiver.

“Just broke a tooth or two. Don’t forget, this woman’s with us here. Take it slow, and we’ll kill her.”

“I’ll call again tomorrow. Get the money ready!” After saying these words, the culprit hung up.

“Damn you, I’ll kill you!”

Pole grabbed at the receiver, growling. The other gang members stood up, some frustrated as they slammed the sofas, and some cursing at the floor.

We really underestimated them. So I swallowed my bitterness. Those guys were stupid, and starting to get anxious. Are they really students/ Matsunaga Kouta’s just a college student, but he’s not going to kill her off, right? Is it too naïve to think of this? He might be a lackey, and we don’t know anything about the other two.

I don’t know if the landlord knows this guy called Matsunaga. But could I ask

her as nonchalantly as Hiro did? So I wondered as I descended the stairs, and just so happened to meet her on the first floor, while she was coming out from behind me.

“Ah, hey...erm, you did chat with Kaori outside, right? Did she say anything else? She told me she had a customer today, that she’ll be back in the evening... but she hasn’t picked up my call.”

The landlord’s looking really worried. Damn it.

“Eh? No, I don’t know. It’s not even 8 yet. I don’t think it’s time to worry.”

The unnecessary concern slipped out of my mouth. I’m an idiot. What if she realized?

“But Mitsuo-san just called too, saying that they’re going to call and discuss about tomorrow. He’s feeling worried because he can’t find her.”

“...Tomorrow?”

“Our shop renovations. He wanted to have a look.”

That’s really bad. The fiance’s coming.

“E-erm, when’s he coming?”

“Eh?”

The landlord tilted her head. What am I doing? Calm down already? Can’t be too direct when asking! It’s too unnatural!

“E-erm, actually, tomorrow, we’re going to clean out the storeroom on the second floor, so it’s not convenient for the chairman to drop by tomorrow, right? It might noisy, and we’re going to move the stuff out.”

I desperately fumbled about for an excuse.

“Ahh, don’t worry about that. You don’t have to mind. Mitsuo-san he’s just dropping by in the morning before going to work, and he’ll be off to the office. But it’s worrying, Kaori hasn’t returned...”

I couldn’t drag this any further. If Kaori-san’s not back by tomorrow, we can’t do anything to conceal the fact that she was kidnapped.

“Erm, that thing that shows the location, what is that again? I can’t use that. Is

it because the culprits aren't any dumber to use Kaori-san's phone instead? We could have solved it then." I suddenly had a thought.

"Erm, since she's working as a masseur, it's probably an extra few customers, right? Also, there's not a lot of people available at this moment. She needs to switch off her phone when working..."

The victim never realized that she was a victim, and I could only attempt to console her. I could do nothing, but it's an important job for this chief inspector.

It was late at night when I received the call from Major. I was waiting in the office's reception room the entire time, and was too excited when I heard the phone rang, nearly snapping the phone in half.

"Found where there are. A certain hotel in Shinuku, sixth floor. Tetsu-san will be with me immediately."

The gang members left in the office stood up. Again, I checked the phone on my watch.

"What time did they check in until?" "11pm."

This is bad. There's not much time left. 20 minutes later, we can't enter the hotel legally, and if this drags on until the next morning, the landlord will take action. The biggest issue is that if we leave the culprits alone, what will happen to Kaori-san.

"Aniki, ojiki called!"

Rocky handed me another phone.

"I'm with Major. What do we do? Do we barge in? If they have a hostage, even I can't take them down immediately." Tetsu-senpai's voice came.

"Major, any way to sneak in? Try to get Kaori-san away from them..."

With two phones in one hand, I tried to engage in a three way call."

"Not immediately. I got some stun grenades, so if needed..."

"No, absolutely not." If that thing explodes, the hotel staff will find out immediately and call the police. What do we do?

Or do I just let Tetsu-senpai barge in? No, there's three of them, and from the phone call, Kaori-san's with them. If they leave her just a second, no, it's pointless if they can't grasp the timing. There's no time to install a bug and see the best time to barge in. What do I do? I instinctively reached for the nametag before my chest. I'm the chief inspector, everyone's waiting for me to give the go signal. I can't continue to space out. I have to decide on something immediately.

At that moment, my eyes landed upon the B4 paper on the table.

I didn't know that piece of paper attracted my attention initially. However, as I tried to divert my attention between major and Tetsu-senpai's voice, something in my ears left me curious.

Alice's words.

Something's suspicious about that.

The many blocks of puzzles collided in my mind, gradually forming shape.

Yes. Matsunaga Kouta knew of the Hirasakagumi existence.

And with an assumption as basis, I put these words on the blank canvas.

Can it work?

I didn't know. But I had to try.

“...Hey, Narumi. Hey!”

“What happened, Vice Admiral Fujishima? If we don't hurry.”

I finally recovered as Tetsu-senpai and Major's voice entered my ears.

“...Ah, so-sorry.”

I coughed twice to clear my dry throat,

“Let's barge in.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Check in immediately, and get up to the level where the culprits are. But don't barge in immediately. Erm, at 11pm sharp. Not a second earlier or later.”

“Why--”

“I’ll explain later. Hurry. Senpai, just think of to get Kaori-san out. Major, get away once you break the lock. Also, you there, Hiro? Please get the other gang members to wait outside, and once they get out, please nab them.”

“*Got it.*”

I put the connected cellphone by my ear as I went to the PC in the restroom. I opened the email, affirmed the phone mail address Matsunaga Kouta wrote in his resume, and entered my final gambit. The messages that appeared in my mind were so smooth, even I was in disbelief. I had no hesitation in pressing the ‘send’ button.

Following that, there was nothing this chief inspector could do. I grabbed the nametag on my chest, held it in my left palm, and brought the second cellphone to my ear, hearing the background sounds of the footsteps, the elevator, Tetsu-senpai’s heartbeat, and Major’s calls, quietly praying.

The time on the computer was 10.59pm. Major muttered the final words,

“*Begin operation.*”

Clenching my sweaty hands, I answered,

“—Good luck.”

At 11pm sharp, the sound of metal and cracking bones formed a terrifying noise, dispersing from the phone into my ears.

*

The long night ended, and the next morning arrived.

August 31st. For a summer vacation without rest nor play for me, it was a terribly fitting ending. I welcomed that morning on the sofa of the Hirasakagumi office.

To the left and right of me were massive bodies that contorted the sofa; snoring away in unison and their mouths open were Pole and Rocky.

The nametags 'Jinnai's little brother' and 'gonetiator' were already removed.

On the sofa opposite me were the other gang members on standby, sleeping in an unsightly manner. The blurry heat remained atop the glass table, and the morning sunlight shone through the window, forming a clear silhouette on the ground.

The high heat and stench of sweat seeped into my consciousness, gathering upon me.

But I had no strength to stop up.

I could only move my eyes to look at the clock. It was 9am.

It was ten hours since the operation ended.

I could feel the pores all over my body being sleepy, but I really felt uneasy sleeping between the stupid giants again, so I had to pry myself off the sofa, and stood up.

There was the sound of a car parked before the building. I gently nudged the

metal door aside, and went out, trying my best not to wake up the men in black T-shirts. There was a shiny Lexus sedan parked by the roadside, and a posh looking man dressed in a grey suit, in his mid-thirties exited the driver seat.

“Sorry for making you worry yesterday, Mitsuo-san. I got hurt while at work, but I’m fine.”

A gentle voice followed, and before my eyes was Kaori-san running onto the road.

Ten hours or so passed since the case ended, I believe. It’s amazing that she could act like nothing happened.

And nothing did happen after all. We piled upon loads of lies and unwise actions, all to welcome such a morning.

When I got back home, I was told off by my older sister for staying out the whole night. I went to take a shower, and wash away the sweat sticking all over my body. I was halfway through changing my clothes when I fell asleep, and it was evening when I showed up at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’.

“5 seconds in and those two were swallowed up, those two! Major, recorded any footage of them?”

“No, After picking the lock, I got out of the hotel as fast as I could.”

“I had it tough too. Those Hirasakagumi guys were so excited, I really gave my all to stop them...”

The summer sun was hanging in the west, but Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro were gathered around the rotting wooden table before the emergency stairs, stacking up empty beer cans as they discussed their heroic exploits.

“Ohh, here comes the chief. Good work there, chief.”

“No, please don’t call me that already...”

I waved my hand in response to Tetsu-senpai’s joke, and sat on the old tyre seat between Major and Hiro.

“You seem really tired, Narumi-kun, even though it’s the next morning after

your complete victory.”

“We should have celebrated last night, but you said you wanted to sleep, Vice-Admiral Fujishima, and that’s why we delayed it till today. You should be pumped up here.”

You guys haven’t slept at all, right? How are you still so energetic?

“It’s a complete victory, and I’m not exactly unhappy at all...”

“What? It’s because of that work you did beforehand, Narumi. When I barged in, the hostage just so happened to be in the toilet, and keeping guard at the door was that Matsunaga kid.”

Is that so? In other words, the message I sent worked.

Even though it was a completely baseless gamble.

“Narumi-kun, what did you do?”

“I sent a message to Matsunaga’s cellphone.”

The trio widened their eyes. But that’s really it.

“I sent a message while posing as Yondaime, ‘2300, August 30th. It’s the entrance test. Show me your guts’.”

“...What was that about?”

Tetsu-senpai groaned with confusion.

“Erm, if I sent a message to Matsunaga, all three culprits would have seen it, right? So I sent a message only Matsunaga could understand, that the Hirasakagumi would take action at 11pm.”

And Matsunaga did react.

So that’s why he sent Kaori-san to the toilet.

“Eh, eh, wait a moment.”

Hiro looked at me with surprise.

“So, in other words, that Matsunaga was helping us?”

“Results-wise, that was the case.”

“But please don’t ask me why, because I really didn’t understand. I just decided on that operation instinctively.”

To be honest, I took action based on some really, really stupid reasoning. It might be better to call it a hunch, so I didn’t say the reason.”

“I don’t understand at all.”

Tetsu-senpai ruffled the short hair on his head.

“So, in other words, like usual.”

Hiro rummaged his pocket as he said,

“Only Alice understands everything, right?”

He pulled out a phone I had never seen before.

“Eh...that’s the phone the culprits used, right?”

“Yeah. Didn’t Alice ask you for this?”

That’s true, but I had long forgotten about this. I received this phone Alice called ‘the crux to everything’.

The fragments of empty knowledge.

Meant for nothing other than to satisfy the detective’s craving.

“So Hiro, what about those three?”

Tetsu-senpai suddenly mentioned this.

“They got locked in the Hirasakagumi’s storeroom. Probably will have some divine judgement on them tonight, taken out one by one, and beaten up.”

“That’s just a waste of time and effort, right? We should have stripped them and thrown them onto the main street yesterday.”

Major bluntly retorted.

“Well, they still have to settle this. Those guys are all about chivalry, so they’re going to settle this their own way.”

Tetsu-senpai patted Major on the shoulder as he said this.

Right, we still had to end this. Even after everything went well, that everyone

was happy, cheering and celebrating, the detective's not overwhelmed with elation. Even at the height of the feast, she's watching the numbers, utensils, and the number of invitations.

Such was the outcome Alice sough.

So I took the cellphone, and turned towards the emergency staircase.

Alice, holed up in the pile of dolls on the bed, grabbed the phone from my hands, stared at the crystal screen for a moment, and nodded. She then sighed, and without a word, turned to the monitor.

“...Erm, you figured out something?”

I asked cautiously.

“Yes. Everything.”

Everything's revealed. The detective's job ends here. Alice practically earned nothing from this job. The only materialistic proof she got should be the truth recorded in the phone.

“But you don't seem happy about this.”

“Yes. I'm really miffed about this.”

Alice actually didn't deny, and that took me by surprise. Miffed?

“I worked so hard to stack up the blocks, slowly crawling like a caterpillar, and ended up right at the same place as you when you jumped off with a parachute and your eyes closed.”

I sighed, and gently sat by the bed.

Through logic, Alice obtained the same answer as I, when I did so through a blind guess, but her method couldn't solve this in time.

I understood very well how helpless she was.

“...You're not going to tell me?”

The black hair swayed.

“It's pointless to tell you alone. At least—”

The doorbell rang at this moment. Alice kept quiet, and stared at the surveillance footage by her beside.

“—They’re here. Go out and welcome them.”

I got up, and glanced aside at the monitor. The surveillance cameras outside the office were blocked by the chests of the black T-shirts, just as this all started yesterday. Today however, there’s one thing that wasn’t there yesterday—Brown fringe, thin eyebrows, and two eyes.

“Kaori-san...?”

I muttered, was nudged forward by Alice, and hurried to welcome her at the door.

Kaori-san left Pole and Rocky on the corridor, and entered the office alone.

“Sorry for dropping by unwelcomed. I wanted to thank you, and they said you’re here, so they brought me here.”

She said as she entered the bedroom, and like everyone else who entered this room, she was dumbfounded to see Alice on the bed.

“...Erm.” It’s too complicated to explain this. “This one here is Alice, and she’s...our brains, you can say. We found the hotel you’re at thanks to her.”

Alice shrugged, and said,

“No need to make things complicated. Just call me a detective.”

“...I really don’t understand.”

Kaori-san sounded really confused as she continued.

“Erm. Then, I should be thanking this little lady, right?”

“Not at all. Most of the credit goes to this chief inspector.”

Mind not calling me that now? But Kaori-san kept looking at me, and lowered her head.

“...Thank you for saving me. Last night was my last day at work. I originally intended to resign earlier, but I was told there wasn’t enough people, so I had to help. So...I never expected that to happen. ...you never called the police, nor notify my mother, right?”

“No, erm, well.”

I really didn’t know how to answer.

The secret we worked so hard to hide wasn’t exactly anything good, so Kaori-san lowered her head sheepishly.

Alice broke the silence.

“...One of the culprits is Matsunaga Kouta. You know him?”

Kaori-san didn’t say anything, her eyes hesitant for a while, before she nodded.

“He’s a frequent customer of yours, right?”

“...You seem to know everything?”

“This is only my guess. I can’t think of any other reason why Matsunaga Kouta got involved with you.”

Kaori-san sighed, and nodded.

“That guy’s a poor student, yet he kept asking for me. He just wouldn’t do anything, just sit on the bed, chat with me. It’s easy for me, but he was a strange customer. So I got too relaxed, and started talking lots of things with him. He started stalking me, and even did what he did last night. It’s unforgivable.”

Why, exactly? I just had to wonder.

And the detective, who did apprehend the culprits and should have revealed the truth, was giving a gentle look in her eyes for some reason.

“Yesterday, I was in the hotel. Those two were hiding in the hotel, and came out. I tried to get away, but it was too late. I heard they graduated from Matsunaga’s college. They knew...that I was about to get married. It seemed the two seniors thought it was fun, and called me over.”

“So they never intended to kidnap you initially?”

“Yes. Those two adults were so old, yet they were trying to coax Matsunaga into doing it once with me before I got married, like he’s a baby. But Matsunaga kept backing off, and they got sick of him. They even threatened to ransom my

family. How terrible.”

Kaori-san grabbed her shoulders that were still shivering. I had to interrupt.

“That Matsunaga was simply forced by his seniors to get involved, I believe.”

“Maybe, but!”

Kaori-san glared at me, yelling.

“He just kept watching quietly. He’s no different from the others! If he hadn’t made the wrong call, I wouldn’t have known what to do! Seriously, I shouldn’t have gotten involved with someone like him!”

“But he hasn’t been watching quietly.”

Alice’s sudden words left Kaori-san covering her move, and she looked at the detective’s face.

“He wanted to save you the entire time. He didn’t have the courage to go against his seniors, but he fought on.”

“...What...are you saying?”

“You did mention to Matsunaga that you’re the only daughter, right?”

Kaori-san’s face froze.

“...Ah, but.”

“So Matsunaga knew that you have no little brother. The first call our subordinate received called himself as your brother. If Matsunaga had been implicit in this, he would have pointed it out since it was a mistake, right?”

“Th-that’s impossible!”

Kaori-san looked distraught as she continued to refute.

“That’s impossible too. That phone cannot possibly make a wrong call.”

The expression on Kaori-san’s face froze.

“Even in the same building, on the third floor, there was no way such a mistake could be made. That was a trap Matsunaga had set up. He had the Hirasakagumi number stored in his cellphone, under the name ‘Jinnai’.

“You’re...kidding.”

“It’s true. Look.”

Alice opened Matsunaga’s phone, and brought it to Kaori-san’s face. The latter’s eyes were turned towards the screen.

“...M-maybe Matsunaga entered the wrong number when he was looking for my house? Isn’t that it?”

“Not at all. He did change the name. Look at the reading.”

Alice pointed at the bottom of the screen, where the reading was.

“Hirasakagumi”

Kaori-san gasped.

“When entering the name of this ‘au’ phone, the reading will be automatically added. But if the input is changed, the reading will not be changed. It’s a lousy function, but it did work out this time.”

It proved the moment of courage from a useless bum. So Alice muttered as she put the phone in Kaori-san’s hands.

He had initially pressed the wrong button, or not. It was a little trap. That trap was not pointless. For he called— “...Why? Why do this? He could have.”

Kaori-san muttered to herself, her voice shaking.

“Yeah, there might be a better way. It’s possible to trap them and send them to the police station, and that could have settled things easily. But...”

Alice nudged herself on the bedsheet, and lifted her head towards Kaori-san’s face.

“Matsunaga chose the Hirasakagumi. Do you know why? Because there’s no one else who can protect your happiness as it is. Neither a detective nor the police could do it, only these idiots of justice.

Kaori-san seemed like she had something to say, but didn’t voice out. All her words seemed to be absorbed into the phone she was gripping.

“Matsunaga really hoped that you’ll be happy. That thing in your hand is the

proof."

After a long, long time, Kaori-san's words sank through the silence, landing upon the bedsheets.

"...But even so." Her eyes were look back and forth between the detective's slender thighs, "What am I supposed to do with this thing?"

"Make your choice."

Alice's voice was devoid of warmth, the kindness bleached away."

"Those were the feelings conveyed to you. It's your choice to abandon or trample upon it. You can't give up on the choice."

Kaori-san's lower jaw was shivering.

She appeared to be nodding, and shaking her head.

Until she left the office, I sat by the bedside, thinking about this.

Matsunaga at this point should be beaten up good by Hirasakagumi, along with the other two guys. Even after they got beaten up, they'll be let go anyway. He'll start to look for the lost phone, and call the cellphone that's in Kaori-san's hands, right?

So what would Kaori-san do? To abandon it, or trample upon it?

Or throw it back?

I didn't know. That's her choice.

The job of the detective and this chief investigator was already done.

So, should I return to being a high school student? There's less than ten hours until the end of summer break, and I had not prepared myself for school, let alone touch a single assignment. So I thought as I went towards the door, but Alice spoke up.

"There's also something I want to ask."

Alice sounded really miffed, and I had to stop by the fridge, looking back at her timidly.

"...Erm, what?"

“So I say, how did you manage to come to the same conclusion as I did? Did you expect Matsunaga to help save the hostage? And you figured it out faster than I did! I can’t believe a fool like you took the lead on me. What did you discover?”

“Well...I didn’t really discover something. I just had a hunch.”

“Even if it’s a hunch, you’re too trusting of Matsunaga.”

“Ah, what I believed in wasn’t Matsunaga. I never met him anyway. I just believed **that no one can be as stupid as those guys of the Hirasakagumi.**”

Alice’s mouth was half opened.

It was awkward, but I continued.

“Think about it. This incident started because some idiot made a wrong call, and the idiot Pole picked up the phone, making a mistake, and the idiots Rocky and the others added on to the mess...how’s that miracle possible?”

It’s impossible to have a situation where a tray carrying coffee and milk toppled over, that instead of the cups breaking, coffee milk was found.

But if someone knew about these guys’ idiocy, and bet on it...

The calendar. Matsunaga knew about the Hirasakagumi’s existence, that they’re all idiots.

If that’s the case—

I just bet on this possibility.

Maybe this was the limit Alice couldn’t cross? Betting on a ‘possibility’ isn’t exactly a detective’s job here.

I carelessly looked back, and found Alice sprawled on the bedsheet, her long black hair like soaked seaweed, scattered apart.

“Wha-what’s wrong? You alright?”

“This is the first time in my life that I feel so defeated...”

No, you don’t have to be shocked by this, right? It’s just instinct.

And at that moment, the office door opened behind me, the two voices

bellowing,

“Aniki, Kaori-san has gone back. We got nothing to do.”

“Aniki, today’s your last day of summer vacation, right? We’ll continue to play the game of finding the HQ. I think I might be a goner at this.”

“You two, sit in a seiza!”

Alice hopped off the bed, shouting.

“There’s not enough space.”

“You can sit on top of each other, I don’t care. And Narumi, where are you trying to run to? Sit down too. I’m going to start researching into the thought process of idiots, and you’re going to translate it for me.”

Spare me already. But with Pole and Rocky’s massive bodies blocking, I, standing by the side of the bed, couldn’t budge an inch.

“First question. Tell me, what is the prefecture capital of Miyagi?” “To the East!”

“Idiot, that’s Miyazaki Prefecture!” “What Miyazaki Prefecture, that’s not even a name!”

And I had to retort. Thus, I accompanied Alice with her idiot counsel till late at night.

This summer vacation full of commotions continued into the last night full of commotion.

The Twenty One Balls on that Summer

At the end of summer, the white ball seemingly absorbed by the blue sky of the field captured my heart.

My summer vacation was wrecked by work. It was not about wasting my life fooling around with the NEETs or helping Alice move the Dr. Peppers around. It was actually about coordinating an event. Including the prior kidnapping incident, my summer vacation slipped away while I was running around.

I couldn't say that such a summer vacation was not fulfilling, but as a 16-year-old high school boy, I do want to lose myself in some things a typical high school student would do.

Entering November, this youthful passion continued to erupt and expand, seeking a place to vent, and then it exploded.

...At the game center.

As my dad was often deployed everywhere for work, I never made many friends from elementary school to middle school--if I did write such things, Alice would probably have chided me "Think about how emotionally retarded you are instead of blaming your dad's redeployment!" But in any case, I did have a period when I spent my time after school alone, at the game center. Such an illness (I don't think it's wrong to call it an illness) eased up a lot later on, one because the fighting games fad cooled off, and two was because my older sister started managing my finances, and I had no money to spend.

In other words, the passionate flames in my heart were never vanquished. With a battlefield and fuel, surely it will be blazing again.

"You'll be addicted anyway! Starting now, Vice-Admiral Fujishima?"

Soon after the second semester started, Major invited me to play an online

baseball game called 'Power Playball'. Like an arcade game that can be connected to others, this game required lots of money. Thanks to the salary Yondaime gave me, my wallet became a lot fatter.

'PWLB' (This shorthand's weird, but it's a given terminology) requires many players to register their teams with their identification cards, and battle online in the entire country. The best concept of this game is the massive player database. Unlike ordinary baseball games where only a few actual baseball players are available for choice, one can automatically generate a player with unique values and fitting name just by entering a person's name. It appears to be composed based on the massive amount of online data.

For example, by entering the name of a famous racer like Senna, Prost or Schumacher, a character with high speed will be generated, while a character named based on a professional golfer will have higher contact and arm accuracy stats, while a pro wrestler will be a power hitter. If the name entered was that of a politician or artiste, the player character generated would have unique values that 'might seem fitting'. Thus, it was a major topic on the internet, and attracted the attentions of players who weren't that familiar with baseball. Even if the name entered was an anime or manga character, the unique values generated can be rather believable; it's really amazing. If the name entered is a baseball player's, the character will naturally have the corresponding values. Even the little details like Kuwata Masumi muttering to the ball before pitching, or Kiyohara Kazuhiro dealing with dead balls will be reflected on the characters, so there had been decent reviews on it. However, the higher the values of the players in game, the higher the cost needed, so it's unlikely to put all stars like Suzuki Ichiro, Ochiai Hiromitsu, Oh Sadaharu and Nagashima Shigeo into the batting lineup. Besides, entering names of ordinary people will create characters that are somewhat decent, so quite a few people named the characters based on their own names.

The appearance templates of the players in the game are all fixed, but the uniforms can be customized with different patterns, and I too got a unique place in the game through the internet; it's not an overstatement to say that my team's famous. I had all the heroines from the Dragon Quest I to IX as my starting players, and had the image of my customized characters plastered on

the uniforms, resulting in it being a subject of report by a few blogs and news stations (just to note, the team's very weak).

"As to be expected of you, Vice-Admiral Fujishima. Our 'Drive a Phoenix' team uniform shall be in your care."

"Please deal with that questionable team name first. I don't want a picture I draw be famous for that kind of team..."

"What's wrong with this name? It means 'Driving a Phoenix! Of course the Phoenix here refers to the F-14 Tomcat fighter jets missiles, nothing to do with a team that couldn't be created after losing to Rakuten in a trial..."

"Who are you trying to bluff here!? Isn't your ace pitcher called 'Horie'?"

"His strongest weapon is a forkball that falls like the stockmarket!" Hey! watch your words! "Anyway, a Phoenix has a fiery, ferocious feeling, so a dazzling golden glowing bird picture!"

So I had an Oyakodon picture pasted on the uniform, but Major was infuriated. Didn't you want a fiery, dazzling bird!?

*

"You have been lax recently. What do you think the job of a detective assistant is?"

On a certain Friday in mid-September, I was nagged at by Alice. I was always loitering at the game center, and it had been a while since I showed up at the agency.

"Yes, Fujishima-kun! It's the assistant's job to take care of Alice's hair! Do remember how to take care of it...ehh, seriously! Didn't I tell you to comb it gently? Like this..."

Even Ayaka was fuming. The three of us were on the bed on the Detective Agency, and Ayaka handed half of Alice's long hair to me, teaching me how to take care of the hair. Ayaka was giving all kinds of criticism at my combing and conditioning techniques.

"But I never asked you two to take care of my hair!" Alice hated the idea of

people toying with her hair, and was unhappy about this.

“I rather have Ayaka or Hiro handle this, if it’s up to me.”

Ayaka’s my classmate, working part-time at ‘Ramen Hanamaru’ in this building. She’s a lot more capable than me when it comes to handling with Alice’s needs.

However, she does act airheaded at times, saying some troublesome things like this,

“But won’t both of you be moving to a larger office and living together, Fujishima-kun and Alice? That will be more troublesome now.”

“Wh-why do I have to live together with Narumi?”

Alice tried to turn her head around, but scowled as her hair was stuck in the comb. Her ears were blushing. Did it hurt that much? Ah, no...so I turned to Ayaka too. What do you mean, living together?

“Holmes and Watson have always been together! Poirot and Captain Hastings! Don’t a detective and assistant have to live together?”

“Who taught Ayaka such nonsensical knowledge? You don’t read any detective novels, don’t you?”

“...Not on me!?” I had no knowledge on foreign mysteries at all.”

“Hiro told me.”

“Ayaka, think about it. Don’t get too close to that gigolo! He’s the guy who’ll try to woo any nurse the moment he’s born! Always with the useless words!”

Alice was so furious that she was patting her thighs. I too was taken aback. Living together with Alice? This isn’t good, is it? Bad in all kinds of ways, so please don’t joke about this. However, Ayaka did once tell off Alice for being careless about the relationship between male and female. Why mention that out of a sudden.

“Hiro and I have discussed over it, and we decided it’s time to change Alice’s education. Since both of you are going to live together, might as well go with the flow...” Who’s going to live with her? What kind of education is this?

“Enough! Narumi! You don’t have to learn how to take care of the chair!”

I was tapped on the shoulder, so I handed the comb to Ayaka, and had her do the rest. I should have done so right from the beginning.

“Listen up, Narumi! I can live by myself even without an assistant like you! Your current job involves only the ironing of clothes. Remember this!”

“Yes yes yes...I get you.”

Alice had been a little more self-aware, realizing that it’s embarrassing for others to strip her. However, I was still the one in charge of ironing her pajamas, for it seemed she was scared of touching it.

“Why is Alice so scared of the iron?” Ayaka continued to comb. It seemed Alice had a phobia as she had once touched it after I had used it.

“Correcting the shape by applying heat. This short-term manner of thinking is truly the terrifying bit. It is barely acceptable if used only on clothes, but imagine...there may be fools who will think of ironing the wrinkles of a human.”

“Oh yes, Alice. Do you know about a hair iron? It’s used to iron the hair.”

Once Ayaka whispered this explanation to Alice, the latter’s black hair jolted like electricity. Alice reached her right hand out towards the keyboard by her side, and the search result appeared on a screen.

“...Wh-wh-what is this device?”

After reading the description of the hair iron, Alice shrieked. So she didn’t know about such a thing before? She got a whole bunch of weird knowledge in her head, and no common sense at all.

“Heats up the hair? That looks like a torture tool used to interrogate criminals! An Iron Maiden is a massage chair compared to this!”

Apologies to all hair iron manufacturers, I guess our detective here has no malicious intent. Alice wiped off Ayaka’s hand, and snuggled into the pile of dolls. Her buttocks were still shaking. Is it that scary?

“Narumi! Never ever use the iron to flatten the creases on my pajamas! Such terrifying devices should be exterminated.”

“How am I supposed to flatten your pajamas...without an iron?”

“Use your hands to flatten my pajamas one by one! Consider yourself lucky to spend an uninteresting life on this!”

“You got to be kidding! I have my own things to do!”

“Oh? What is it? Say it.”

And with her actually mentioning this, I was a little disturbed.”

“You’re not trying to say that you’re revising or reading ahead? Don’t make me laugh. You’re definitely repeating the year.”

“Ugh...I!” I retorted, “I do some sports after school.”

“So, ‘Power PlayBall’?”

“You know about that?”

“The NEET detective knows all incompetence. Furthermore, you are a highly popular creator on the internet. How can I not know? I do know you have been designing crude uniforms that show lots of skin, and got a bunch of high salary players, but you never won at all because of your utter lack of team balance.”

“How is that crude? Many people requested me for such things! What can I do?”

See, even Ayaka, who doesn’t know anything, is giving me a weird look here!

“E-erm? What is it? Fujishima-kun? You’re unable to graduate because you lack credits, and now you’re drawing eros to earn a living because you don’t want to work?”

“I have no idea where to begin retorting, so I’ll stay silent.”

“But you aren’t. You said something.”

“Ahh yeah.”

“...Actually, Fujishima-kun, you’ll say everything and anything to yourself, and that’s why we’re having this conversation. You haven’t realized?”

“...Ayaka, you can’t mention that to him directly! Look at his devastated look. It’s like a worm on the asphalt exposed to the sunlight the entire morning, no?”

“I-it’s okay, I’m not that devastated...” I weakly refuted. “It’s not the first time Ayaka said this about me...”

Ayaka had first said this about me before the Angel Fix incident. In other words, I was told off by two different people, and this was a lot worse than before. She couldn’t remember, and yet that’s what she said of me...whatever, in the future, I’ll just work in a job that doesn’t require me to talk to others. Maybe I should just live as an illustrator...

“Eh...but...since you are earning, that means your illustrations are amazing, aren’t they, Fujishima-kun?”

Ayaka tried to speak up for me, but she ended up wrecking me instead.

“it’s not real money, just in-game currency.”

Alice coldly noted as she tapped at the keyboard, showing the ‘PWLB’ forums. Shown on it were the illustrations I put up for auction. Most were already sold out.

“Did you draw these, Fujishima-kun? Eh? Looks like some anime illustration I saw before.”

Ayaka looked back and forth between me and the monitor.

“The one at the top right was used in a movie poster, isn’t it? I can see it that everywhere on the internet.”

“it’s not that simple. Actually, this game doesn’t have a function to upload pictures, and he had to use the tool provided by the maker to do all these.”

Alice began to explain gleefully.

“If current available pictures can be uploaded, there’ll be a controversy over copyrights. That’s why the game maker provided this outdated drawing tool. So outdated, ovals can only be drawn.”

“Eh? Ehhh?”

Ayaka pointed at the monitor, looking flabbergasted. Shown on the monitor was a swimmer girl with glittering skin.

“In other words, the bored people in this country really have too much

unnecessary stubbornness and skills that surpassed the make's expectations. By changing the diameters of the ovals, any straight lines and curves can be made. The drawing process can be replayed. You can see by looking."

Alice pressed a key, and the image on the monitor was refreshed immediately. Ovals of various colors and sizes gathered, gradually forming that swimsuit girl.

"It's a fast forward. Probably takes about three to four hours to complete."

No, I spent about 8 hours actually.

"Amazing...so there are really such bored people on this world!"

"That assistant of mine sprawled on the floor happened to be one of them."

"You two nag too much!" I hammered at the corner of the bed, trying to refute. Alice gave me a cold look, and even Ayaka looked at me with pity.

"Eh, well...it's fine, Fujishima-kun!" Ayaka stammered, "Drawing a swimmer girl with ovals is pretty impressive too!" That's not a job! Stop trying to console me in such a strange manner.

At this moment, the bell to the office rang. My savior appeared. It's Major.

"Vice-Admiral Fujishima, you're here? We're deploying to 'Game Nishimura' today."

I hurried out, and nearly crashed into the computer rack. Game Nishimura was the playground we deemed as our battlefield. Don't say that we're being deployed. This isn't work."

"Stop creating a fuss when you enter." Alice glared at Major, "Narumi's doing work as a detective assistant. Go look for someone else."

"What work? It's Ayaka's job to take care of your hair, Alice."

"He's in charge of being bullied by me."

"Major, let's go."

I sighed, and hurried out of the office.

It was evening, and the setting sun was finally behind the building, the heat seeping from the asphalt mixed with some coolness. There were a few trendy shops on the road, and as usual, few passers-by as we went our way from the office to the station. There were a few stalls selling ice cream and crepes that livened the mood. The low-rise buildings and the stout culture hall could be seen, and the passers-by started to increase in numbers. ‘Game Nishimura’ was opposite the culture hall, next to the batting practice centre. The slender and long apartments seemed to be flattened by these two buildings, and the windows from the first to the third storey were covered with glamorous gaming posters. Like usual, there were a few customers moving in between the crane games at the entrance.

“Major! There’s quite a few retro games on the second floor after renovation. Mind checking it out for us?”

Once we entered the shop, a nervous looking bespectacled man walked out. This Nishimura-san is the shop owner. His dad is the boss, but as the latter has been hospitalized for long, he ended up running this business at a young age.

“Oh? I’ll have a look.”

Nishimura-san had been asking Major, a fellow gamer, for suggestions. Major gleefully looked into a corner deep inside the second storey, acting like a consultant, only to be arranged.

“This much, and you say that you gathered all the retro games? What do you want me to say?”

“Is-is that so?”

“Don’t import any classic shooting games. They don’t attract young people, are too common for retro games, and nobody’s interested in them. At least bring in Bomber Jack or Libble Rabble.”

“Uu, yes, I understand.” Hey! You’re really going to do what he says?

Speaking of which, Nishimura-san seemed to have aged quite a bit since summer break. The large gaming consoles on the first floor are one thing, but there’s hardly any customers on the second and third floor. Probably having difficulty doing business.

“Didn’t you import six ‘PWLB’ during summer break? Hasn’t that improved things?” Major asked, and Nishimura-san’s shoulders dropped.

‘The only ones popular are large online games. Everything else, best not to talk about them.’

Nishimura-san looked around at the retro games, and sighed reluctantly.

“The manufacturer has been going about promoting new gaming consoles, and we had to do discounts like the others...the highly anticipated games were soon pushed for home port...I heard that ‘PWLB’ will be moved to home port soon. The future sure is bleak...”

I guess so. You can say that the glory days of game centers is starting to end with the advent of family gaming ports and internet.”

“Wait a sec, Major.” You shouldn’t be saying that here. Nishimura-san started to cry as he wiped at the screen of the console.

“Even the part-timers quit very soon. The batting centre next door’s closed down.”

I was about to mention that it was quiet next door. So they had closed down?

“I don’t know if our shop can last through the winter,,,”

“I-it’s that bad?”

Whenever I came by to play ‘PWLB’, I had to queue, so I never had to worry about that. Thinking about it, given the space, there isn’t much earnings.

“Owner, mind if this thirty year veteran at the game center say something here?” Aren’t you just twenty a few days back? Major leaned on the chair, a leg resting on another as he looked proud. Nishimura-san kneeled on the floor, and clamly said, “Please do!”

“The most important part of managing a game center, is to not bother with what the gaming maniacs say.”

“You don’t have the right to say that, you gaming maniac!”

“You see, Vice Admiral Fujishima...” Major pointed at the empty second floor, “Gaming maniacs are maniacs, and no matter how we complain, we can’t leave

our games. Normal folks have many ways to enjoy life however. When they feel that game centers are boring, they'll walk away silently. If we're going to change this shop by our wishes, we'll have the crane and gacha games disappear, and install various retro fighting games. This will result in worse performances."

"Now that you say so, that is correct..."

"Now what am I supposed to do...?" Nishimura-san asked as he sat down next to Major.

"Anyway, why do you want to continue this decadent business?"

Major never minced his words the entire time. Seriously, if this shop closes down, won't you and I have issues with that?

"It's my dad's shop. I like games too, so naturally."

"This isn't a trade that can be done naturally. Do you know that every year, the current gaming industry will continue to evolve the business models, and yet the large games that use hundred yen coins like before..."

Major continued his spiel of words, and I had to hurry down the stairs. There were people gathering around the large pachinko-like 'PWLB' machines.

"Narumi! Didn't Major just drop by too? What are we waiting for? Registration for the Tokyo Open Preliminaries is open." The college students gaming with us kept waving to us.

"Are you done with the full Morning Musume team?" So asked one of those in high school...probably a senior. We met in the gaming club, and to be honest, I really did not know his name.

"But...that team is really weak, you know? I did make the illustrations..."

"It's fine, show it now. Nobody's looking forward to seeing how strong your team is."

Amidst the laughter, I was shoved to the side. We inserted our identification cards, and the teams were decided. The 360 degrees monitor showed the dazzling green of the Tokyo Dome, "Hey! The opponent are all from Johnny's!" "This Morning Musume group can match up against them, I guess." "Wait,

Nakai's a baseball nerd. He's strong!" "Hey! Isn't that Mori there? Now he's treated as a racer! Super fast now!" "That Kimura's basically a baseball player!" and the spectators roared. I was choosing the starters using the touch panels, feeling the passion oozing from the bottom of my heart. Game centers certainly were becoming a thing of the past, but I kept visiting to experience this passion.

For the following few hours, we kept inserting coins into the 'PWLB' console. Midway through, Major joined the battle, and after four months into the pennant race, the firefly lights told us it was time to close shop.

"I'll tell the shopkeeper to keep it open the entire night!"

Major never won a single game the entire night, and tumbled out as he tried to look for the shop owner. I hurriedly stop him.

"Don't forget what you just said before!"

"It's just an ordinary situation, nothing like the current situation. A customer has to be loyal to his own desires, and give stubborn requests to the shop owner!"

You know you're stubborn, so keep it in check! Besides, running a shop till late at night can mean getting their license revoked! Major ignored me, stormed past the empty shop as everyone else had went home, and head off to the back room.

"No! Nishimura-san's busy too--"

The door to the back room was slightly opened, and there was a commotion heard at this moment.

"...You should be thinking about your own future now, right? This shop has no future. You know how the previous manufacturers bully the shops when they don't get payment, right?"

"Don't think we'll keep giving you such good conditions here."

Major and I stopped immediately, and we exchanged looks. There were two fierce sounding men, along with the timid voice of Nishimura-san.

"But...I can't decide on this alone..."

“In that case, how about we pay a visit to the hospital?”

“N-no, please don’t. My dad’s really not in a good condition. He can’t take any more shock.”

“So can’t you decide on this now?”

I tried to lean by the door, but my leg latched onto the chair accidentally. The chair I kicked over collided into a game console, causing an unexpectedly loud noise. Major, who was next to me, widened his eyes at me.

The door to the back room opened, and a tall young man dressed in a black suit and light brown sunglasses appeared, the red shirt under his collar clearly showing a pattern.

“What are you eavesdropping about, you brat?”

Major and I stumbled back.

Behind the red shirt guy was a middle-aged man dressed in a white suit. There was a footprint by the edge of the desk, his hand on Nishimura-san’s shoulder, the latter all curled up.

“Ah, so-sorry, but...”

I had a look at those two, and looked over at Nishimura-san.

“It’s fine. We’re just talking business here. Okay, hurry home now.”

Nishimura-san barely forced a smile. “Tch.” The red-shirt man clicked his tongue, glared at us, and shoved the door aside.

The white lights of the fireflies continued to flicker incessantly above our heads.

*

The following day, after school, I came to ‘Ramen Hanamaru’, spotted Tetsu-senpai slurping the Chinese cold noodles at the back door, and immediately mentioned this to him.

“Those guys are yakuza, surely?” senpai immediately responded.

“...I guess so! So...”

I put my bag down, and sat on the tire opposite him. The heat of late-summer never faded, and the sweaty short-sleeved shirt was sticking onto my head, just like the duo yesterday I could not forget.

Next to that area was one of the bustling streets in Tokyo, and I could see such vicious looking people practically every day. However, I knew very well they were really members of the yakuza. I really didn't want to have this instinct of identifying yakuza, but I did have a few close encounters with the violence gangs, so I figured it out immediately.

“Now the question is, why did Nishimura-san get involved with the yakuza? Did he owe some money to some bad company?”

“Maybe that is the case...”

Nishimura-san did say business was tough. Based on what we eavesdropped upon, it appeared things were a little more complicated. Since the yakuza had proposed some good conditions, I'm guessing Nishimura-san promised them something.

Anyway, Major and I escaped with our tails behind our back. Nobody asked us to stay behind and be a busybody, but it didn't seem good to leave others behind and run away.

“So? Where did Major go?”

“He said he's still worried. Once ‘Game Nishimura’ opens up, he'll drop by to look.

“It's about 4pm. Since he's going to ask about what's going on, I guess it's about time he would show up now?”

“What about Nishimura?”

Min-san, who was preparing to open shop, suddenly pushed the back door aside and poked her head out. It's hot, and there's no customer, but just wrapping a sarashi around your chest without wearing a vest is too stimulating now, isn't it? So I thought.

“So that guy's shop is going to close down? Haven't seen him drop by for a

few drinks recently...looks like he went about borrowing money everywhere.”

“So it’s that bad that you heard of it, Min-san?”

Nishimura-san’s Min-san’s classmate in high school. He lived near Tomozou-san from Okabayashi Sundries, and they inherited their fathers’ shops after they graduated from high school. It seemed even in recent times, they gathered together to drink.

“I heard him mention about managing the game center in high school...” Min-san muttered.

“Eh, that much money is needed to run a game center? And he had to borrow?”

Tetsu-senpai put down the empty bowl on the table, looking up at Min-san.

“Of course he needs to. You NEETs won’t be able to understand though.”

Min-san sounded really frustrated as she answered,

“A new game platform needs millions of yen. There’s also the logistics and the utilities bills. The hundred yen coins I get from the loafing brats.”

“The game centers have been closing down one after another when I was still in school, I think! Might as well pack it up.”

“If he ended up having to borrow money from the yakuza, he might as well close shop...”

While Min-san was muttering to herself,

“No...erm...I didn’t borrow from them.”

Suddenly, there was a voice from the alley. We turned around in unison, and spotted a tall lanky figure standing between the buildings, “Nishimura!” Min-san widened her eyes, “Don’t you have to take care of the shop?”

“Ah...well, Major said he can take over for the time being...”

We entered the ramen shop that had yet to open, and took up half of the 5 seats at the counter, facing Min-san in the kitchen “It seemed they wanted to move their office to the fourth floor of our building.”

“You were threatened by them?” Min-san was chopping the onions, only

lifting her head slightly to glance at Nishimura-san.

“Yes. It seems they want to modify the place into a pachinko parlor, and want to chase us away. Well, it’s more like if we don’t move, we’ll have to pay for protection fees.”

“That’s being involved with civilians.” Min-san impatient swept the chopped spring onions into the Tupperware, “Since it happened, couldn’t you have reported it to the police and have them deal with it?”

“But...it’s not that simple...”

With a bitter grimace, Nishimura-san ruffled his soft, natural perm hair.

“My dad’s on somewhat good terms with the landlord, so back then, the landlord charged us little for rent, and that’s why we managed to keep running until now. It seems the landlord owed the yakuza lots of money, and demanded money from us. In name, he said he wanted to increase the rent.”

“And then he’ll pay the excesses to the yakuza directly?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“Hm, I guess...”

As long as the landlord wouldn’t say anything, this roundabout way of earning money would make it hard to disprove that the yakuza did anything violent against the civilians. Recently, the yakuza has been becoming smarter.

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know what to do. That’s why Major called me to come here to discuss it with you guys...”

So was that the ‘good conditions’ mentioned?

“Eh? Th-then ‘Game Nishimura’ will have to close down.”

I grabbed Nishimura-san by the shoulders, and shook them hard. That’s our precious court!

“So I don’t what to do either...”

“You’re really indecisive!”

Min-san slapped the chopping board, and Nishimura-san jolted back in shock, all shrivelled up.

"Narumi, bring him over to Alice to talk. Also, check on the landlord and the yakuza. Not much loss if we check them out beforehand. I always hated this guy's lack of decisiveness. Really, he annoys me so me, I want to beat him up."

"No, wait, master." Tetsu-senpai interrupted, "How are you going to ask Alice to handle this? Nishimura-san hasn't decided on what he wants to do. Also, Alice isn't someone to act on sympathy or justice."

"Hm...well...you're right..."

Min-san folded her arms. The bespectacled shopkeeper looked crestfallen as he sat on the middle chair. Naturally, all three of us looked at him, and saw him lower his head, muttering, "Erm...actually...I wanted to discuss this with you...I haven't exactly figured out how to deal with this..."

Min-san's eyebrows rose, and so did her hand.

"No, Min-san! You still have a chopper!"

I hurriedly stood up to stop her.

It was after Nishimura-san scampered out of the shop that Tetsu-senpai noticed her.

"What are you doing there?" he said as he looked towards the corner of the kitchen in the back, the door at the back. Min-san and I too noticed that there was an opening at the back door, a petite silhouette. Min-san darted over and pushed the door aside. "Woah!" Alice, dressed in pajamas, flailed her arms.

"It's damn hot out there. What brings you here?"

Min-san grabbed Alice by the shoulder, to prevent the latter from falling over.

"Narumi just wouldn't bring the client upstairs." Alice puffed her cheeks as she said so.

"Eh? Why?"

I poked my head out from the counter, and stared at Alice, who was outside the door.

"Didn't the owner of 'Game Nishimura' show up looking glum? I saw that on

the surveillance camera. Narumi! Why didn't you bring him up--"

Alice entered the kitchen, and looked around, only to remain silent. That's a rare reaction from her. Her skeptical look remained as she stared back and forth between Tetsu-senpai and me.

I had a bad feeling, but I cautiously told her,

"If you're looking for Nishimura-san...he went back, you know."

"What!?" Alice's face was immediately flushed. "Th-then hurry back to the office!"

"Bring her upstairs, Narumi." Min-san said with a sigh, "Since she's scared of being lonely like an ordinary person, why does she choose to be a NEET instead of going out?"

"Who said I'm lonely!"

"Alright alright, let's go! You're not looking so good!" if you have agoraphobia, don't force yourself here! I went to the back door, grabbing the furious detective by the shoulders, and nudged her up the stairs.

*

The following day was a Saturday, and I did not have to attend school, so Major and I went to 'Nishimura Game' that morning, and we even asked Tetsu-senpai along. Tetsu-senpai was worried something bad might happen, and he also did say "I haven't showed up there in a while. Let's go set a new record at the punching machine. But I think I did set the last record, right?" I really didn't dare to tell him that the punching machine was removed as it was not doing well.

It was a holiday, and there was quite a crowd next to the "PWLB" soon after the shop was opened.

"What. It's doing well."

Tetsu-senpai stood at the entrance, looking around at the human wall that had gathered, noting leisurely.

“The customers are only visiting the ones with large online gameplay.”

“*Goodness, gaming noobs sure are troublesome.*” Major frowned, giving such a look.

“There are no customers on the second and third floor.”

“In that case, how about you put such baseball games on the third floor?”

“It’s a classic case of rookie game center managers failing. It’s not nice to hear this, but baseball games are just a fad. The game elements ‘PWLB’ has lack originality, and this fad will die down once the online discussion cools off.”

I was really annoyed to hear these words. Words aside, the tone alone was infuriating.

“When ‘PWLB’ was introduced, it was a no-name game, and the common criticism is that baseball games are no longer trendy. The shop owner liked it a lot, and bought in four sets, but it’s because of them that this pitiful game center had a stable crowd. This was the only place to play ‘PWLB’ back then, so everyone gathered here. Now it’s just barely hanging on because it’s the earliest to start the trend.”

I see. I didn’t know that.

“Once the trend fades, if the third level is all ‘PWLB’, the customers will be gone. Without customers coming in, the game center can’t do anything to get them back, unless there’s a brand new, popular game introduced...the shop might close down by then though.”

“What do you mean? It’s useless to work hard? So why were you gleefully talking about game center management?”

“What I mean is that we can only work hard to prevent a loss of customers.”

I nodded away without thinking. I see. It hurts, but it’s really convincing.

“So why do you two come to this shop every day? There are many places with these game platforms though. There are a lot of places with such games, you know? Your school has a few game centers nearby, Narui.”

“Hm?” I folded my arms without thinking. Yeah, why? I never thought about gaming at another shop.

“You too, Major. You badmouthed about Nishimura-san the entire time, so you could have gone to other shops too.”

“That’s not really the case, Tetsu-san...”

Major gave a gentle look, one that was unlike the usual him.

“You know who badmouths the Hanshin Tigers the most? Obviously it’s the fans. You always grumble about how the ramen of ‘Hanamaru’ tastes bad, but how many years have you been there, Tetsu-san?”

“Oh...yeah...”

“And that’s how it is.”

Major raised a finger as he said that. At that moment, there were a few gamers queuing and watching, waving towards us once they noticed us.

“Major, there’s an opening in the mini link Central League. Did you form a team filled with 9 batting pitchers? Come join in already!”

“You came by too, Narumi? I bought the RPG character and design book. Please draw them on the uniform.”

I waved back at them with a smile, and followed Major as I broke away from the crowd, into the area with the large silver balls machine. So that’s how it is; because we feel at ease here. There’s us, everyone, and the field, but that’s all.

Rain or shine, even if we do complain from time to time, we will return here. This is what we call ‘home field’.

“Just one game.” Major was yapping away, queuing up at the game, but I dragged him off to the back room. I was about to knock on the door, and there was a loud shout behind the door, as loud as the background music in the shop.

“Don’t think we’re going to keep a low profile like this.”

“Seriously, Nishimura-san, it’s useless to not mention it to anyone else, you know? Your rental agreement will run out next year, and you will be chased out by then. We are being kind in our proposal here.”

Major and I were shocked, and we exchanged looks. It’s those two yakuza

members. They showed up in broad daylight? We never expected to meet them directly.

“...Is it them?” Tetsu-senpai leaned over from behind. I nodded, and he reached for the door. I couldn’t stop him from pushing the door in.

The air inside the cramped back room seemed alit. Nishimura-san, crouched before the desk, turned towards Tetsu-senpai, and so did the two yakuza members flanking him from front and back.

“What do you want?”

The young red-shirt man tried roared, trying to scare.

“I’m Nishimura-san’s lawyer.” Tetsu-senpai gave a bare-faced lie, and took a few more steps into the room.

“Wa-wait a sec, Tetsu, don’t do thsis.” Nishimura-san panicked, “We’re busy...”

“And that’s why I showed up. You can’t do anything alone, Nishimura-sa--”

Midway through, Tetsu-senpai stopped. His eyes were not looking at the two yakuza guys, and not at Nishimura-san, but to the left of the door. What? My vision was blocked by senpai’s burly, and I could only lean my upper body out to see what was going on.

There were lots of chassis, blanks and cleaning too, and amongst the items, there was someone leaning on a folded chair. Once his eyes met mine, I nearly exclaimed, “Oh? Isn’t this Tetsu? Oh? And Narumi?”

The massive body nearly bursting the floral shirt, his brows and hair shaved off, giving a weird look, and the eagle eyes deep in his sockets were sizing us up.

“Nemo-san...” Tetsu-senpai uttered.

I remembered him. I couldn’t forget that Octy’s face. He was one of the yakuza, and one of Tetsu-senpai’s mahjong pals. It’s my third time meeting him, and I really wanted to get rid of this relationship.

So Octy smirked, baring his uneven teeth.

“Looks like things got complicated here, huh? Hey boss, this place is too small.

Not a good place to discuss something important.”

“Eh? Ah, ye-yes, after the shop closes then.”

“You idiot. You think I got the time? Close shop now, ya.”

“Eh? Eh?”

Nishimura-san widened his eyes. Octy stood before him, reached his hand out for the wall opposite the desk, where the power switch was at.

“Wa-wait a moment! What are you--”

“Tak.” The sound of the switch pulled down echoed, and I cringed, closing my eyes. I had the feeling of a torn Achilles.

“Oi!” “What is this!?” “A power outage!?” “You’re kidding! We’re having a match now!”

There were growls coming from the other side of the door, and thus, I opened my eyes. There were the sounds of footsteps of chairs being toppled over in the darkness. For a moment, cold sweat trickled down my skin, either because the air conditioning was switched off, or my heart was racing.

“...Ne-Nemoto-san, what did you do?”

Nirshimura-san feebly protested, but Octy shoved him aside, went by Tetsu-senpai and me, and walked out of the rest room.

“A power outage. We’re closed for the day!”

The loud roar caused the rowdy shop to quiet down.

“You hear me? Scram. We’re closing.”

Octy declared with a hiss. The few people playing ‘PWLB’ just a moment back saw this unfriendly bald head, and backed away with pale faces, while the customers standing further away probably couldn’t see Octy, even protesting.

“What is this?” “Hey! We’re playing!” “Refunds!”

“Nemoto-san, please, don’t trouble the customers...”

Nishimura-san was begging, basically in tears, but Octy raised his trunk-like arm, and grazed it past Nishimura-san’s nose.

A loud thud echoed through the shop, shutting the growls of the customer. I couldn't gasp. Octy's fist sank deep into the silver machine of 'PWLB', the tiny cracks appearing in a radial manner, as though an asteroid had appeared on the cover.

Nobody said anything, and there were gulps of fear.

"Need me to repeat myself, you shitty brats?"

Octy's voice was like icy cement burying the floor of the game center.

"Didn't you hear me tell you to scram?"

I stood behind Octy, and saw the customers disperse, suddenly reminded of what Tetsu-senpai once said.

There is no good yakuza on this world.

A blunt sound came from behind, and I turned around to look. A completely dumbfounded Nishimura-san had collapsed on the 'PWLB' console, nearly falling onto the floor, while Octy grabbed him by the collar. Nishimura-san had passed out.

"This is unsightly. Hey, get him in a lie down."

Octy tossed Nishimura-san to his underling, the young man in the red shirt. I hurriedly returned to the back room, only to be grabbed by Octy.

"You got some things to say to us too, right? Whatever, let's go."

There was no other customer in this dark room, and Octy had his white suit underling stand behind him, while he sat on the game console, facing us.

"Seriously, what's your deal with the owner, Tetsu, Narumi? Why stand up for him, ya?"

Tetsu-senpai folded his arms, wondering how to answer, and I couldn't help but remain worried about Nishimura-san in the back room.

"That brat with the visor has been poking around for no good reason again. Better go back to elementary school now, brat."

Octy tapped Major on the helmet. It seemed those words caused Major to flip

out.

“I’m a college student! Didn’t I mention it the last time!?”

Major was seething as he shoved his student card to Octy, who was about four heads taller than him. I looked on, feeling terrified.

“Oh? Really? Wow, nice college you’re at. Stop following around at this scrap of a game center. Study well and get a good job. It’s pointless to be unemployed like these bums here.”

Wait. Don’t look at me right after you look at Tetsu-senpai. I’m still a high school student.

“Unfortunately, I have no wishes to be employed.”

Major gleefully replied. Octy laughed it off, and the white suit man behind him looked incredulous.

“Of course, being in college means I have to laze around for eight years, and put my student card to good use. But, to make it seem like I graduated top of the class, I have to take leave starting in February, in my fourth year. During my school days, I’ll start to write programs, earn money to set up a game company, and by commanding my underlings, I can climb up the industry, and be recognized by Forbes and the president as ‘the Japanese Bill Gates who doesn’t work at all’, always thinking about how to play!”

“Nobody asked you for such dream-like life plan.” I slapped Major on the back without thinking.

“So basically, I’m not exactly fooling around at game centers for no reason.”

Major continued to refute. Octy, whose stance had been ambiguous the entire time, suddenly showed a friendly side, so I let Major continue to express himself.

“I’m here not just to play, but also to observe the industry as a maker.”

“What nonsense is that!?” When did you become a maker? But Major ignored me.

“I don’t know what the owner thinks, but this shop is a stepping stone to our future. One day, I will build a headquarters seventy levels tall, and if the

legendary game center this superstar CEO Major Histoshi Mukai visited is no longer around, it'll be pretty troublesome."

"The one troubled should be Nishimura-san!"

"...And then?"

Octy narrowed his eyes into a slit.

"I know this shop from the inside out, so I came by to negotiate with the temporary owner. Tetsu-san's just my bodyguard, and Vice-Admiral Fujishima is my bag carrier. Now then."

Major pulled a chair over, and sat before Octy.

"It's preposterous to raise rental by 250%, and they can't continue to run this shop like this. We got no other choice, so, I got no choice but to ask you to lower the price."

"Wait, Major...Nishimura-san's lying on the bed. Deciding this on your own is..."

"What do you mean, decide on your own? Whose shop do you think this is?"

"Of course it's Nishimura-san's!"

Octy burst out laughing as he lifted his head, and his underling behind him looked concerned.

"...Ojiki, who are these brats? They seem familiar with you..."

The white suit guy whispered at Octy's ears, and Octy took turns to look at us, before turning around to ask.

"You heard of the Tabara-gumi incident? They did it."

The white suit guy paled."

"Also, the second-hand clothes shop 'Alan Garba'? This brat got involved the last time, so remember him well. His actions are more unpredictable than the other two. Even I owed him a favor."

I felt goosebumps. It's hard to explain the specifics, but I was dealing with that Octy in the quarrel over 'Alan Garba'. I managed to scare him after lots of nonsense. Eh, so the 'favor' he talks of is basically about that?

"That second-hand shop is doing really well now. Your bluff actually came through Narumi. Got to thank you for that."

"Eh, yes."

I lowered my head. Better to not owe a favor to the yakuza, and never to have the yakuza owe me a favour. That was a lesson I had learned many times, but never applied.

"Since you have asked, I can't say that I won't consider it at all, ya. Tell me, how much until it's affordable?"

"How can we show our cards here? Of course, our request is the same rental."

"Ohhh, nice going there, Major."

Tetsu-senpai seemed to be annoyed by this, and he ended up leaning on the game, cheering.

"You brats sure are cocky there. What kind of negotiation is that? That's a no go."

The smile vanished from Octy's face. It seemed I was the only one able to stop them. So I thought as I tried to get up, but Octy leaned his torso forward.

"So, how about a wager?"

"...Eh?"

Without thinking, I stared right at Octy's bald head.

"Wager? You guys like to gamble, right?"

"We love it." "What are we betting on now?" Major and Tetsu-senpai's eyes were glittering. Don't you guys realize you're dealing with the yakuza here!?

"If you win, I won't raise the rental, and I'll continue to lease out to you guys. If I win, you guys have to move away, unconditionally. Whatcha think?"

"Sounds good. What are we betting on?"

"Of course it's mahjong."

"Alright, I'm in!" Tetsu-senpai grinned as he rolled up his sleeves.

“Wait wait wait senpai! You’re bad at mahjong. Let’s get someone else to play, okay?”

“Then you and Major...”

“I don’t wanna! I don’t want to be grouped with people talking about some dragon pulse or some Koumei’s stratagem! There’s no chance of winning here! Our opponents are mahjong experts who play with tens of thousands of yen here.”

“Well, only the owner will have issues if we lose, so no biggies?”

“What no biggie!”

“How about we bet on something else? With horoscope?”

“How are we going to bet on horoscope?”

“Of course, the one with the better horoscope wins!”

“I’m Virgo, and my Masami Kuramada is the strongest.”

“Oh, I’m Sagittarius!”

“I’m yakuza.”

“Enough with this pun already, and aren’t all of you yakuza? Think about it properly!”

“Then, how about rock-paper-scissors?”

“You’re intending to get someone without a pinky or an index finger, so that we can’t decide if he’s throwing scissors or paper here, right?”

“Vice-Admiral Fujishima’s, you tongue’s on real fire today.” “You’re pretty scary, Narumi.” “How are you seriously so amazing in these unnecessary areas? Goodness.” Why are you three so impressed by me!?

The guy in white suit shrugged, and tried to step forward and intimidate us, only for Octy to raise a hand to stop him.

“In that case, let’s do something you’re good at.”

“...Good at? You mean.” Major tilted his head.

Octy pointed at the large ball-shaped machine of 'PWLB'.

"How about baseball?"

"Is that alright? You know the rules?" Major looked excited.

"Of course. Don't underestimate the yakuza."

"It was pretty unexpected. This hardboiled Octy plays this online game too?"

"Alright. The game's decided."

Major nodded firmly, and I had no disagreements. I think we have a bigger chance of winning here, right? To be honest, I didn't know why he would be so kind to give us a free service...

"So we'll decide this on one game?"

"No problems."

"So let's settle the conditions. If you guys win, the rental contract and fees remain. If we win, you guys will shut up and immediately; ah, I don't think it's possible to do so immediately, right? Alright, close shop and move out in a month then."

"Understood."

At this moment, I should have thought a little deeper into this. Major and Octy quickly agreed however, and I went along with their decision, and thus I did not realize something.

That we were had.

"So it's decided. Right, we're leaving ya." Octy said to the white suit. He then hollered to the back room "We're going back!" the red suit then showed up.

"...Ojiki, i-is this really alright? Aren't you giving them too much leeway?" the white suit guy remained concerned.

"It's fine."

"So we're just going back? We don't mind settling this here. It's a little sad that we don't have spectators, but we can have a real go here."

With a confident smile, Major frisked out his IC card, pointing his chin at the

silver ball machine.

But Octy then gave a mysterious smile.

“We can’t compete now though? Got to book the grounds. The riverside grounds seem good, ya?”

“...Grounds?”

Major looked stunned.

I supposed the expression I showed back then was the same.

“Yeah, and there’s four of you now. You need nine for a baseball match.”

*

The following day was a Sunday, another rest day.

“I heard that everyone’s going to play baseball against the yakuza?”

Hiro hurried into the office, looking either bemused or shocked. I was kneeling before the bed, while Alice continued to berate me.

“Not only did you not bring a potential customer up, you made the situation worse! And you made your own negotiations while the customer is unconscious? It is so foolish that I do not know what I should say to nitpick your stupidity. A monkey typing on a keyboard for thirty minutes might write a smarter AI than you!”

“I’m reflecting on my actions.”

“Huh? Seems serious here.”

Hiro passed me by, and sat down next to Alice.

“Here! This is some of Min-san’s purple sorbet. Have some and calm down.”

“This isn’t a question of whether I’m angry or not! Don’t think you can coax me with some sorbet!”

Though she said so, Alice snatched the cup and spoon from Hiro’s hands. In an instant, the rustling sound of ice delivered into the mouth echoed in the cold air.

“Erm, so, Narumi-kun, you and Major and Tetsu all got fooled?”

“Yeah, well...you can say that.”

Of course, after that, all over us protested, saying “We said it’s a baseball game, not a real baseball game.” However, once the yakuza catches you with something, it’ll be really scary. The joking atmosphere from just a moment ago vanished without a trace, and Octy’s eyes became as heavy as a lead ball.”

“Didn’t you agree to this yourselves? Now you want to renegade on your words, brats?”

After hearing that, Nishimura-san, who had just recovered, passed out again.

Because of this, Major probably went down to ‘Game Nishimura’ to check out what’s going on. Should I go down too to apologize with him?

“What can be accomplished with your apology to owner Nishimura? How about you tackle the realistic issue instead?”

Alice coldly noted.

“Boss Nishimura will contact the yakuza himself, saying the promise has nothing to do with the shop, so it probably won’t happen anyway.”

“Hmm...but...”

We’ll be right back at where we started. It’s only a matter of time until the shop closes.

“Did you think that since the conditions are fair, that if you participate in the match as told and win, it’ll all work out?”

“I did think of that, maybe...”

“As an assistant to this NEET detective, speaker of the dead, have you not any self-awareness?”

The empty sorbet cup was thrown at me.

“Try thinking of how to solve this issue with intellect and words instead. Settling this with some baseball match...”

“Don’t underestimate baseball! A baseball match requires thinking and talking too.”

“You’re just playing it for fun. On what basis are you acting like professionals?”

“Narumi-kun, if we’re settling this through baseball, Alice can’t help. She’s angry because she’s lonely.”

“Why talk about loneliness?”

“Because, this has nothing to do with you when nobody made a request, Alice. And you interrupted.”

“Uuu, that’s because...hey, where are you going, Narumi? I’m not done talking!”

I decided to leave Alice to Hiro, and escaped the office. In any case, I should look for Nishimura-san and discuss things with him. We’re the ones who agreed to play baseball, but as Alice had said, Nishimura-san should be the one asking Octy to cancel the bet. He won’t accept those conditions anyway.

But once I reached ‘Game Nishimura’, I found that the shutters were down. I took out the phone to check the time, and found that it was 11am, Sunday. The shop should be open at this time, and a few usual customers were wandering before the shop.

“Ah, Narumi.”

“Is it closed for the day again?”

“Those guys yesterday were yakuza, right? Did the owner rile them?”

“It’s scary, but I’m worried about him, so I came by today. Why is it still closed?”

“Did the owner get beaten up and sent to hospital?”

The usual customers asked me various things.

“W-well, he’s not hurt, actually...I don’t know why it’s still closed though.”

Was he still unconscious after passing out the second time yesterday? Probably not.

“Anyway, Major isn’t here?” I asked, and everyone shook their heads.

Guess I got no other choice. I got to the back of the building. There was a door leading to the back room, and it wasn't locked.

“...Excuse me...Nishimura-san, are you in?”

The lights in the rest room were lit, and the computer at the desk was on. In other words, Nishimura-san was already in the shop. I entered cautiously, and heard a voice from the second floor.

“Oh? It's you, Narumi? Sorry for yesterday. I passed out.”

Nishimura-san was holding a pail and cloth,, preparing to tear down the posters off the second floor window.

“No no no, we should be the ones apologizing.”

I immediately waved my hands profusely.

“Since you're always with Tetsu and the others, you might be sued to this, Narumi-kun. However, it's better not to get involved with the yakuza, if possible.” Saying that, Nishimura-san smiled weakly. “It'll be bad if bigshots like that one came by, causing trouble for the customers, so I decided to close shop for the time being, until it all settles down.”

Hearing these words left me really pained. This man's always worried about others. Maybe it's for this reason that this shop gives such a homely feeling? And we, “I'm really sorry for us making that weird decision. Major and I mistook it for a video game, and we let our guard down. Erm, sorry, I guess. It was impulsive of us.”

“Ahahaha. That bald yakuza can't possibly be playing 'PWLB'. For some reason, he really hates that game.

“...Eh? Nemo-san?”

He didn't seem to have any interest in games, yet he hates 'PWLB'?

“The first time Octy came by, his initial condition was that the game center can continue to run. But his condition is to remove 'PWLB'...”

“But...why?”

“Aren't they going to renovate the fourth floor into an office? He said that

every time, he'll hate brats in the shop downstairs talking about baseball when they don't know anything about it, that it angers him.

"So he hates baseball? No, he's angry because he likes it?"

"But if we move 'PWLB' away, there's no point in continuing the game center. That's why I considered accepting the prior proposal."

"To turn the place into a pachinko parlor?"

"Yeah, my dad will probably agree to it. There are a few game centers nearby, and unlike before our place isn't the only one where 'PWLB' can be played at."

Nishimura-san opened the window, and pulled down the poster facing out, only to suddenly stop and not say anything, widening his eyes as he looked downstairs.

I too approached the window.

"...Why...those guys."

Nishimura-san muttered. The usual customers wandering at the shop entrance never left, and instead, multiplied.

"Hey, heard this shop isn't doing well." "Is it closing?" "Should have come often."

"Well, how about we hold an event?" "How about a 'PWLB' tourney?"

"Sounds good." "We'll promote this on the internet." "Get Narumi to provide illustrations."

Such a conversation happened downstairs. Nishimura-san leaned by the window, not moving at all.

Suddenly, an intriguing silhouette appeared in my line of sight. I could tell from the camouflage helmet that it was Major. He was carrying a backpack as big as he was, with a few baseball bats in the pockets.

"You guys! We're starting trials for the team!"

Major yelled, and put down the items at the entrance of the now-defunct batting center.

"What trials?" "Why bring bats over?"

“We’ll be having a baseball match that determines the survival of ‘Game Nishimura’, so now we’re going to start choose players!”

Major continued to explain, and the lazing customers were increasingly excited, a crowd moving into the batting center that was forced open. Major, you haven’t learned your lesson?

“I’ll go stop them.”

I hurried down the stairs, and darted out through the back door.

“Listen up, the key to us amateurs winning is defense! Right now, we’re going to test catching. I don’t have enough mitts, so we’re share! I’m starting the machine!”

Major started the pitching machine, swinging the bat as he commanded everyone. These guys are all amateurs though, and the direct pitches all ended up on the floor.

“Those without mitts are to try batting! We’ll start with 100kmh pitches!”

“Major, what are you doing?”

I darted past the group excited to compete, and finally found Major, who was behind the net.

“We need to gain some forces capable of fighting, or we can’t achieve victory in this battle for ‘Game Nishimura’.”

“No, anyway, Nishimura-san hasn’t given the okay.”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it? If we lose, the owner can just go ‘I don’t know about this, so it’s invalid’. It’s a zero risk high reward bet, so why not?”

“I see.” So I had such a thought in my mind. That was embarrassing.

“How’s such a twisted fallacy able to work the yakuza?”

“It’s fine, join in too, Vice Admiral Fujishima. Your mobility and vision should be good. Looking forward to your performance.”

“Hey Major, help us set up the machine here!” “”Set it to 120kmh already.”

The contestants swung the bats, and Major immediately got the machine up and right.”

“Too fast!” “But we could hit them in game!” “Couldn’t hit them at all!”

“You guys are too useless!” Major tapped the bat in his hand on the ground. “With such lax defense, a bunt can become a homerun!”

“Bring it!!” “Louder!” “Come on! Louder!”

“Enough, everyone.”

I was about to say so, only for the batting center to quiet down.

I turned around, and saw the metal doors of the entrance opened. A bespectacled frail body with natural perm entered. It’s Nishimura-san.

“Nishimura-san, say something. It’s a batting center that’s closing down, so using this place is.”

But Nishimura-san raised his hand, stopping us, and even said,

“Lend me a bat. I’m taking part too.”

I was gobsmacked. The customers, covered in dirt, were also dumbfounded.

Nishimura-san received the bat from Major’s hands, and raised it over the batter box.

“Set it to 140kmh. 10 shots, continuous.”

Nishimura-san raised the bat, and stood his ground like a large wooden block. There was a tense atmosphere filling the place immediately.

And over the next fifty seconds, our eyes remained fixed on Nishimura-san’s swinging. The white balls that were knocked aside let out a crisp sound, perfect arches and high into the net.

I thought Nishimura-san was a weak, bespectacled nerd, and even I was so taken aback. I glanced aside at Major, who too shook his head, giving a “I didn’t know he’s that strong.” Look.

After batting away ten balls, Nishimura-san sheepishly put the bat by his leg. For a moment, nobody in the arena could say anything.

“...Everyone, thank you.”

Nishimura-san lowered his head, muttering. And then, he looked around at

the dozens of people in the batting center.

“But, we’re dealing with the yakuza, real yakuza. I don’t want you guys to get involved to me. All of you are my customers...Sorry, I’ll open the shop now. You can play as you want. I’ll be happy with this.”

So a flock left the batting center, while Nishimura-san hurried to the back of the building, into the back room.

The metal shutters opened slowly, and the noise of the game consoles welcomed us.

Major and I stood at the entrance, watching everyone enter the lights and sounds of the shop, and then Nishimura-san, now changed into his uniform, walked out from the crowd.

“Major, there is something I want to ask of you.”

Nishimura-san lifted his head, showing an expression as clear as the pebbles at the bottom of a riverbank, and Major nodded, his lips still pursed.

“Please find enough team members to face off against the yakuza.”

“Your request is understood.”

“I’ll to ask Hanada and Tomozou.”

Nishimura-san turned around, returned to the shop, and muttered,
“We just need to win.”

*

It was at ‘Hanamaru’ that night when I learned Nishimura-san was a member of the baseball club.

“Our school’s club wasn’t really strong, but that guy was the ace pitcher who led them into the semifinals of the city tournament. There was quite a commotion too.”

Tomozou-san of the wine shop had not dropped by at in a while, eating and drinking shouchuu as he mentioned the past.

“He really loved baseball back then...”

I kept refilling for Tomozou-san as I nodded away understandingly. It's because of this reason that he brought 'PWLB' into the shop soon after they were sold, and never thought if they would become a fad.

“Semifinals, so they made it to the first two rounds of the Koshien? I really don't know if that's amazing or not.”

Min-san, frying pork liver and leek behind the counter, asking,

“The other members weren't practicing though? So it's all because of Nishimura that they won all those matches. That's pretty impressive.”

We say so, but it's not that easy. It's been a while since Nishimura last play, and the opponent probably won't be looking for weak opponents...even if Tetsu and I are to be second base and shortstop...”

“You're pretty pumped up for this, Hanada.” Tomozou-san laughed. “Tetsu can't be the catcher?”

As for the Tetsu-senpai they were talking of, he was seated on the beer crate outside the shop, going through a personal rundown on the baseball rules with Hiro.

“Hey, what's the infield fly rule about? Why is this rule made?”

“So that there won't be a deliberate double play.”

“So what do you do?”

“Well, you know anything about fielding out?”

“No I don't.”

It appeared Hiro was having trouble on his side. I didn't know about Hiro's athleticism, but since he's in good shape, he should be more useful than me, I guess.

“Which position will you play, Fujishima-kun?”

Ayaka, who was washing the dishes, asked me excitedly.

“The scorer, of course.” Min-san coldly retorted.

“Which base does the scorer defend?” “The scorer’s the one recording on the bench...”

Faced with Ayaka’s cruel ignorance, I had to answer politely.

And when ‘Hanamaru’ was about to close, the main star finally appeared, as Major brought an amazing special guest.

“Found a perfect shortstop here!”

Major entered the shop with a grin, and once I saw the person lift the noren behind him, the ramen in my mouth nearly sputtered out.

“Heard some idiots got involved in some dumb stuff?”

“Yondaime!? Y-you’re discharged!?”



I screamed, only to be glared at by the wolf eyes beneath the grey hair. He was dressed in a black vest, his arms and shoulders wrapped in an astonishing amount of bandages, but he seemed to be in good spirits, and the killing intent he had was back. He sat on the chair next to me, and ordered a bowl of char siu ramen from Min-san.

“Eh, well, you’re joining the team too, Yondaime?”

“Major said he’ll pay. I rested for far too long, so this is good activity for rehab.”

Is it really already to do that after being discharged? So I wanted to ask, but Tetsu-senpai’s voice came from outside the door.

“What? You guys are joining too? Rockys’s suitable to be the catcher.”

“No Tetsu! Catcher’s the most difficult position! The catcher’s the commander of the team, someone who has to be familiar with the rules.”

Taken aback, I lifted the noren, On the dark streets, there were two slowly moving silhouettes behinds Tetsu-senpai and Hiro, and they’re Pole and Rocky. They too were called in?

“Ojiki, ah, aniki too. Please take care of us!” “We’ll beat them in one hit!”

The two guys in black shirts bowed deeply, and I was strangely uneasy about this.

“Erm...you guys don’t know...the baseball rules, right?”

“Yes, not at all!”

“We don’t know how many points we get for beating the pitcher!” Points, my head.

“You idiot, the only sport you can earn points from knocking down someone else is hockey!” “It’s not hockey!”

“Stop fooling around here! These guys are dumb as bricks, but even idiots know that they have to run after batting, right? Don’t talk too deeply about baserunning.” Yondaime said, “And more importantly.”

I was dragged by the collar along with the chair, and stopped before

Yondaime.”

“You guys found good umpires? Need four of them.”

“Umpires? Erm? Yeah, so what about them?”

Octy was to book the baseball field, and I naively thought I could leave everything to him. Hearing my honest remarks, Yondaime sighed hard.

“Seriously, you’re dealing with the yakuza here. The yakuza will use any underhanded means necessary. Which idiot who have the opponent control the umpire? Get an impartial third party. Of course, someone who isn’t scared of the yakuza will do.”

“No, who am I supposed to look for?”

“Enough already, give that Kusakabe Masaya a call.”

“Eh, ehhh!?” Why mention his name now?

But Yondaime’s right. That guy knows Octy, and is calm in nature. Also, he owes Yondaime and me a favour, so he shouldn’t be too biased to Octy.

Yondaime prompted me to call, and I had to take out my phone.

Of course, once Kusakabe Masaya heard about this, he was flabbergasted, and clicked his tongue about twenty times or so.

“Can’t you deal with this in a smarter manner? You thought you have a chance of winning?”

“We heard the owner of that game center did pretty well in the city tournament, and the others are pretty athletic, so we should barely...” “Are you guys idiots? Nemoto was a pitcher who won a few times at the Koshien.”

“Ehhhhhh!?”

You bastard, stop screaming at my ear. I got scolded. It was really hard to imagine so however. That Octy used to be a baseball player?

Ah, that’s why he hated ‘PWLB’? No, that alone shouldn’t be enough reason. Nishimura-san really loves ‘PWLB’ for similar reasons.

“I knew Nemoto when I was still in school, and was often dragged along to watch the Hashin Tigers. He’s a hopeless baseball manic, and really wanted to

make it to the pros. To be honest, there were scouts who eyed him..."

I switched the phone to my left hand, and rubbed my sweaty right palm on my thigh. Since he really loved baseball, why did he end up with the yakuza?

"How would I know? It's been thirty years ago! Anyway, his fastball's ridiculously fast, though he often lost control...there were few who could hit his pitches even when he was in high school, let alone you guys."

"But he hasn't actually pitched for a long time, right? So we should be able to..."

I said so, but my heart was sinking. Nishimura-san too hadn't pitched in a while.

"Eh, well...we need umpires who won't be intimidated by the yakuza, and we really couldn't think of anyone other than you, Kusakabe-san."

"Got it. This is the last time I'm helping you brats out. I'll find four guys who knows baseball from a few different gangs. That works?"

"Sorry to trouble you. Oh yeah, erm...we'll pay the full amount."

"Of course."

The phone was hung up on it, and once I mentioned "Octy was a winning pitcher in the Koshien", there was quite a large commotion. Major, get some muscle training regiment here! Understood, I'll get them here. Let's practice throwing at an octopus head. Tetsu, can't you be the pitcher? I'll throw the bat...

Dumbfounded, I listened to their conversations, and suddenly had a thought.

It certainly feels like an all-star game in February.

So, we had the following starting lineup.

1. Min-san (Second Base)
2. Yondaime (Shortstop)
3. Nishimura-san (Pitcher)
4. Tetsu-senpai (Third Base)
5. Rocky (Right Field)
6. Hiro (Center Field)
7. Major (Left Field)
8. Tomozou-san (Catcher)
9. Pole (First Base)

This starting lineup certainly seems strong, especially from the first to the fourth batter. The eighth and ninth batter can also work as cleanup spots. This

lineup doesn't seem like it'll have any weaknesses!

Me? I'm a bench player.

"Fujishim-san, shall we make preserved lemons?" Ayaka asked me for some reason.

*

The batting center next to the game center ended up as our practice ground. I arrived there after school, and found Major, Tetsu-senpai and Hiro there, being coached by Nishimura-san.

"Use more of your flank, and not swing your wrists. Turn your waist around, and use all the strength in your body, like you're squeezing cloth. Yes, now swing the bat forward like that--"

Nishimura-san, who's being our batting coach for some reason, was enjoying himself, and I (as a bench player), joined after changing into my school gym uniform. I started swinging as a pinch hitter would work as a trump card. On the first day, I got blisters on my hands.

It was the second day after our team was formed when Octy dropped by.

"Oh? You guys aren't backing out? Struggling like amateurs."

He was looking beyond the net, into the batting center, right at me in the eyes as I made a large swing, chuckling. The young man who accompanied him that day came along, and since it didn't look like he'll wear anything other than suits, he was not on the baseball team. The man wearing sunglasses and an aloha shirt was someone I had never seen before.

"Sorry to invite you over here."

Nishimura-san lowered his head nervously as he went outside. Tetsu-senpai and Hiro paid no mind to them as they kept stretching.

For a moment, I didn't know what was going on, so with bat with hand, I went out of the door, and kept watch behind Nishimura-san. The yakuza will use any underhanded means necessary, Yondaime's words kept lingering in my ears.

“We got the date and location.” Octy said. One week later, at the baseball field by the riverbank.

“Sorry to trouble you for this.” Nishimura-san kept his head lowered.

It was strange to see such an honest response, but Nishimura-san earnestly thanked him.

“To be honest, I thought you would pretend not to know as the owner.”

Octy’s ferocious glare looked back and forth between Nishimura-san and me.

“Why decide on the match?”

Nishimura-san gave an apprehensive smile.

“...If this can be settle by baseball, I think it’s good. The shop that was about to close is barely hanging on because of a baseball game, and we’re settling its fate with a baseball game...doesn’t seem bad.”

Octy coldly snorted, and spat on the ground. I stumbled in shock. His eyes were giving a lead-colored glint.

“Absolutely disgusting.”

The usual customers frequenting the game center might have heard this howl, and they all looked over in shock.

“What do you mean, baseball is fun? What baseball game? Always with the naïve attitude...I really want to crush this shop.”

Nishimura-san’s sidelong face looked really tense. Again, I cautiously looked towards Octy. Why did he hate baseball games, or despise it, even?

“...Nemo-san, you did win a few times in the Koshien, right?” I said. Octy immediately widened his eyes.

“So what?”

“No, nothing.” My voice was stuck in my throat. “I just heard that a few profession teams scouted you. So why do you look like you hate it. And if you really do, why settle this with baseball?”

Before I knew it, the browless, vicious face was before me. I couldn’t breathe, for he had already lifted me by the collar.

“Enough with the know-it-all words, you amateur.”

“Nemo-san.” Nishimura-san said with a pale face, but was hushed by a glare. Octy’s eyes looked back at me as he gripped at my collar harder.

“So what if I made it to the Koshien? Look, how many winning pitchers in the high school tournaments can you remember? One’s good enough, because everyone forgets what happens after that summer. Do you know how many people make it to the Koshien? Anyone who hasn’t made it as a pro will be forgotten as trash once a summer’s over. Listen up, any form of baseball that doesn’t earn money is trash. I’m willing to play this game of baseball because there’s money involved. That’s it.”

Octy tossed me aside on the asphalt. All I could feel was the air squeezed out of my body, and for a moment, I could only remain collapsed on the floor, unable to move. Nishimura-san, and even the two yakuza lackeys behind Octy were utterly terrified.

Octy bent down, picked up a body that rolled out from the opened doors of the batting center.

And he swung his right arm.

Something let out a boom, and a few customers in the game center exclaimed in shock.

“What was that?” “Hey! Look at this!” “A ball?” “It’s sunk in!”

I personally witnessed that amazing pitch. The bullet-like fastball struck the ‘PWLB’ unit furthest inside the shop, and there was another dent on it, as deep as the dent Octy caused that day.

Octy turned away, leaving behind the chattering customers and the dumbfounded us.

But his words kept lingering in my ears.

Everyone forgets what happens after that summer--

*

--But even so, we can't leave it as it is."

Tetsu-senpai said during the meeting at 'Hanamaru' that night.

"If things get out of hand, drag them out to fight and beat them up."

"We're dealing with nine yakuza members here. Ah, no, including the bench, that's twenty of them. You can't beat them all no matter how strong you are, Tetsu." Hiro corrected as he sat by the side.

"It's not like one pitch or two will settle this." Yondaime drank his Japanese wine as he said this, "Age will affect physicality. We get a chance to counter in the later half."

Those words were probably meant for Nishimura-san, who was seated in the middle. Our ace player blinked with some surprise, and then nodded, not looking very confident.

Behind us, there was the voice of Major cheering on Pole and Rocky. They couldn't remember the baseball rules, so he could only use a portable baseball game to get them to remember.

"This beer is on the house!" Tomozou-san dragged the beer crates out from the back door of the kitchen. "Win and you can pour it all over yourself!"

"Isn't it too early to be happy?" Min-san, who was stir-frying, looked on wryly.

"Ah, right, we got that thing hidden there too."

"L-let go of me, I'm not a cat!"

Dragged in by Tomozou-san on the collar was Alice in blue pajamas. She was holding a large bear doll, and a baseball cap on her head for some reason.

Everyone present gathered their eyes upon the black hair of Alice, who was outside, and for a moment, silence lingered amongst the steaming scent of chicken bone stock.

"What? If you got anything to say, say it!"

Alice finally turned her head around, blushing as she said this. Why glare at me?

"If you feel lonely for being excluded from your friends, just say so. Ayaka's

making sweetened lemons for everyone.”

Min-san said, and Alice immediately grabbed the baseball cap, looking really agitated.

“Who’s feeling lonely here!? Listen up. Narumi’s my assistant. Don’t dispatch him whenever you want!”

“Well...”

There were looks from everyone going “Say something, you.” And I could only speak up.

“Alice, are you unable to say that you want to join the team?”

“Of course I’m joining.”

Enough with the jokes I can’t laugh at! This isn’t some hyperbole, it’s a fact, you never lifted anything heavier than chopsticks in your life, have you?”

“I asked her.” Ayaka poked her head out from the corridor, “Alice has been looking lonely, and with another girl present, everyone should be motivated, right? No need to worry about the expenses. I agreed with her that when showering, she’ll wear a shower cap. Payment is waived off.”

What’s with the unnecessary actions? I turned back to the detective, who was dressed in pajamas, puffing her chest proudly, “Eh, erm. You don’t have to force yourself there. Also, a position that suits you is,”

“Isn’t there a position for me?”

Alice pointed a finger right between my eyebrows.

“I’m the manager, of course.”

The silence was as awkward as the stench of an old apple that had turned bad.

...Manager. Alice, manager?

“You serious, nee-san?” From my right was Pole’s voice, “Manager?” and there was Rocky from the left.

“No way you can be a baseball manager, Aice?” Tetsu-senpai sounded really incredulous. However, Alice pointed hard back at him.

“You’re the third batter. Tomozou will be fourth. Boss Nishimura will be fifth. Rocky and Pole will be sixth and seventh.”

“Why? It might sound like boasting, but I should be the one most suited for cleanup right, if we’re considering explosiveness and hitting rate? Nishimura-san’s the best hitter, so he has to be third, and we still need some impact from the bottom of the order.”

“Don’t talk based on your feeling here. Does the explosiveness of a boxer guarantee that the ball will fly further? Of us here, only Boss Nishimura has the skill to hit homerun. Your assumed power hitters, Tetsu, Yondaime, Mastter, and Tomozou all simply have a higher chance of getting on base, and that’s why we set them all before the homerun batter. It’s a passive batting order.”

“How do you know of everyone’s on base percentages?” I had to ask Alice.

“Of course, it’s because I had a look at the footage Major recorded during practice.”

I glanced to the back, and found Major giving a stunned look. It appeared Alice had hacked into his computer and obtained the footage. Why go this far?

“Also, your tactics are mind-bogglingly terrible. Improving the batting strength after the sixth batter is something pro teams will do, if they have sufficient players, that is. They can ignore the defensive liabilities there, and put the power batters on seventh and eighth instead of the usual defensive players. But a team formed of a ragtag bunch doing this? This is ridiculous. Isn’t it more appropriate to have the stronger batters get on first?”

Alice rattled away, and Nishimura-san, the only one with baseball experience, scratched his head saying, “Well, she’s right.” The others too could only lower her head.

But even so, I never expected Alice to be so serious about the match.

“Please, nee-san! No, manager!” “Please!”

Though I was taken aback by Pole and Rocky, I hesitantly looked over to Tetsu-senpai and Yondaime. Everyone present were giving wry looks, shrugging, and Nishimura-san, our team leader, asked Alice, “...Can you give instructions during the match?”

A few intrigued looks swung between Alice and Nishimura-san.

“Of course. Hiro, remember to drive that day. I’m going to give commands from the car.”

Hiro didn’t answer, instead raising the cup filled with Japanese wine.

“Then I shall leave this to you. This shall be a request from me.”

Nishimura-san’s words dictated everything. The detective firmly nodded.

“I will be the brains of the team, since all of you have air for brains. Katsuya Nomura did say that baseball is a sport that relies on brain. First, I’ll show you the signs for baserunning.”

“Righto!” “Sharpen our manliness!” “Shut up and get out!” “Master, you’re a player too, right? Everyone, remember this.”

Alice climbed onto the kitchen table.

“Listen up. You can’t remember anything too difficult now, right? If you see me slap my cap on my chest twice, it means everyone is to ‘advance base’, one time ‘don’t move’, or ‘run back’.”

“Ane-san, you don’t have any chest there.” “they’ll sink in if you keep hitting them.”

“Shut up!” Alice’s ears were flushed as she hopped off the desk, “If you have time to worry about my chest, worry about your brains! Next, the batting signs-”

And as expected, after hollering and pointing in the steaming kitchen, Alice, who hated the heat, soon fainted. I could only carry the limp, flushed detective back into her office.

“Uu...this is embarrassing. I cannot give actual commands during the actual match.

Alice crawled onto the bed in the bedroom with strong air conditioning, muttering,

“You don’t have to force yourself there. It’s not like we have to have a manager during the match...”

“Nemoto Kiichi was a baseball player from a famous school in Kyoto, and in his second year, he became their ace pitcher.”

Alice buried her face in the pile of dolls, and after a while, I turned back, and saw her eyes. Nemoto Kiichi. Nemo-san, so she’s referring to that Octy?”

“His team was defeated in the quarterfinals of the summer Koshien. Soon after, there were news of him being involved in baseball gambling and match fixing with a gang, and soon after, he dropped out of school.”

“Match fixing...in high school baseball?”

“There were still records in the magazines and news. It was said that a relative of Nemoto Kiichi owed the gang lots of money, and he had to obey. The details of how the match fixing happened came out too.”

Alice showed the results of her investigations on the screen. I had a look, and gasped.

“...Is this...form of match fixing even possible?”

“He did it. Nemoto Kiichi was a pitcher with such an ability, but he had to do so to earn money.”

Startled, I recalled what Octy had said.

“Any form of baseball that doesn’t earn money is trash.”

So that’s what he meant? He might have gone overboard with it, but it’s true. His dreams of becoming a pro player were crushed, and he gave up and joined the yakuza.

“That’s all I managed to find out.”

Alice’s voice was filtered through the dolls.

“It was thirty years ago, and there was no scorebook. There is nothing to indicate Nemoto Kiichi’s pitching profile. What pitches does he have? How much he sweated, what he said; everyone had long forgotten about him.”

It’s true that there were a thousand baseball players gathered upon that passion-laden Mecca every spring and summer, and other than the winners, everyone left behind will be defeated, crying, and going their separate ways,

forgotten.

Most failures will not exist in anyone's memories.

Ironically, the reason why Octy was remembered was because of his sin of defying the spirit of the game. Because he played for money.

Everyone had forgotten about the rest.

"But even so, we know one thing." Alice muttered coldly, "He's not an easy opponent. You guys need my brain."

I nodded.

To be honest, I wasn't feeling comfortable after Octy lifted me by the neck, so I was actually happy when Alice volunteered to help, and that I actually felt that the players on the field aren't alone.

What about you, Octy? You aren't fighting by yourself, right? Your battery behind the facemask, the seven teammates standing behind you, and the guys on the bench were looking at you, right? Is it true that nobody actually remembers you?

At that moment, I thought of a possibility.

I stood up, practically without thinking, and I was the one startled when gave a startled cry.

"Where are you going?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, right."

I couldn't help but look down at my limbs, and my toes were already turned towards the door. There was some anger in my fingertips, blowing aside the cold air of the air-conditioner.

I couldn't remain anymore.

"I want to check on sometime."

Since I'm a bench player, I had to make the trip.

I left the office, looked down the corner of the emergency staircase, and found my teammates drinking and chatting away around a faint circle of light.

*

Looking up at the clear skies and the sun shining upon the ground, I finally got the feeling that summer was coming to an end. The sun dangling in the middle of the sky, but it didn't feel hot; sometimes, there was the gentle breeze grazing my cheeks.

It was a certain Sunday, at 11am in late September.

I pedalled my bicycle to the ballpark by the riverbank, and found that there were a few cars parked there. The net was so broken, and the dirty bench was covered in dust. The bases were buried in the ground, and there were weeds in the outside. All I could see was the white ball flying between the men spread all over the grounds.

Looking afar, I could see at that ones present were yakuza with either punch perm haircuts or bald guys with tattoos on their heads. They had no uniforms, and were dressed in aloha shirts or vests, but the team colors gave an intimidating vibe.

Octy was standing on home plate, holding the bat and hitting pitches away for his teammates to practice. Everyone seemed crisp in their movements, and I was increasingly uneasy.

“Narumi-kun!” waving his hand from a familiar looking blue foreign car was Hiro, waving at me. It drove down the slope covered with shrubs. The back seat behind him was stuffed with dolls, and I barely managed to see the head of black hair there.

“Alice, are you seriously giving commands from the car?”

I asked as I looked through the car window, and Alice, who was seated in a seiza, lifted her head, and picked up the baseball cap.

“Of course.” She stared at me with a pale face, “The opponent’s not the team; the sun, atmosphere and earth are all my enemy. But I won’t run away.”

No, you can run away now. If you’re suffering that much, just go back to the office.

Following them was Yondaime, driving by them in his Coupe. He was dressed in a baseball cap, and for some reason, he looked as amusing as Alice and Hiro.

“Major isn’t here? Isn’t he in charge of bringing the equipment here?”

“He was playing ‘PWLB’ till late at night. Probably overslept.”

“That idiot! Why game the day before the match!?”

While we’re talking, a few members on the yakuza team were approaching Yondaime from behind.

“Oh, you’re Narumi?” Eh, me?

“Heard you’ve been giving lots of suggestions there, ya?” “Didn’t you crush the Tabara-gumi?”

I was surrounded by a bunch of hunky yakuza members, and wilted away like a dried flower. How much have rumors of me spread in this world? I heard that the Tabara-gumi wasn’t doing so good after that, but please don’t blame me for that.

“Hinamuraaa, heard you haven’t been doing well recently.”

They looked towards Yondaime, and mocked him.

“Don’t think we’ll play around if you guys like today.” “Thank Nemo-san for his kindness.” “Sounds like he hasn’t decided to end the match here and then by a few points. But you probably don’t want to be beaten by twenty or so, right? If you want to give up, you can lower your head anytime you want.”

“Stop touching me as if you know me.” Yondaime retorted without backing down, “You should worry about heatstroke or a lack of breath in the second half.”

“Huh. Your tongue is as sharp as ever.”

I watched them bicker worriedly, and at this moment, another car appeared by the riverbank. It’s a white wagon, and when the door opened, there were four middle aged men dressed in floral shirts. From what I could tell, they too was yakuza. A man wearing a cream-colored summer suit and sunglasses stood out; it was Kusakabe Masaya . So, these guys are the umpires? It might sound recreational, but this certainly seemed formal. They even had their umpire gear

and facemasks prepared.

But once I saw the last person hop out of the wagon, I was dumbfounded.

“Mr Assistant!”

Flailing her arms and twin braids, and running down the slope was a girl with coffee-brown skin. Why is Meo here?”

“I heard from dad, so I came to cheer you on! It’s my first time seeing a baseball match!”

She grabbed my arms as she said so, while Kusakabe Masaya eyed us unhappily.

“Assistant-san, which position are you playing?”

The bench there, but I couldn’t bring myself to say so. While I was wondering how to explain, a bicycle rushed down the cycling road, and glided down.

“Fujishima-kun, I brought drinks and preserved lemons!”

Hopping off the bicycle with the ice bucket on her back was Ayaka, who met Meo. “Eh?” “Eh?” both of them gave each other confused looks. Oh yeah, it’s the first time both of them met. It’s too troublesome to explain matters, so I hastily broke free from Meo’s hands. Major just so happened to carrying a large pile of stuff in his bag, down the stone steps, so I hurried over towards him.



Behind me, I could hear the car door opened, followed by Meo shouting, "Woah! Miss Detective! It's been a while!"

"Woah, why out of a sudden!? Let go of me, Meo! S-stop, ahh!" Alice made a strange sound.

"Alice's weak point is the neck. You can't touch her like this!" Ayaka chided. We're deciding the fate of a shop here, but these girls don't have any sense of urgency here.

After 11am, Nishimura-san was the only one not present. We were feeling uneasy as we began to practice. Yondaime in charge of pitching. His batting control was pretty good. Octy looked towards us, and showed a smirk. Feeling uneasy, I returned to the bench, and was about to give a call to Nishimura-san, only for the phone in my hand to vibrate.

"Sorry, I have to make a trip to the hospital."

Nishimura-san seemed like he's panting. Hospital? Is his dad critically ill?

"My dad just called, saying that the yakuza has visited him at the hospital, and is forcing him to stamp the contract."

"Eh? What? Contract?"

"They want him to sign the contract, accept the money, and hand over the shop. I wasn't willing, so they went to convince my dad. I told him not to talk to them until I reach there, and I'm going to stop him. I'll hurry over before the match starts!"

The call hung up. Giving a look of disbelief, I looked over at Octy, who was on the first base bench.

Why? What's going on? Didn't we say they didn't have to move if they win? Our eyes met for a moment, and after seeing the smile on his face, I felt a shiver.

We're dealing with the yakuza, they'll do anything dirty if necessary.

They forced our hand, just in case they lost the match.

I hustled over to the batting batter, and explained matters to Yondaime. Tetsu-senpai and Min-san too came to home plate to understand the situation.

“So Nishimura’s heading over now? How long to the hospital? 30 minutes to and back? Or more?”

“Might not be able to make it back by 12. Are we going to change the batting order?”

Rocky, standing near first base, seemed to have understood what was going on, as he pointed his finger under the glove at Octy, who was on first base.

“What did you do?”

“What? Who would I know?”

Octy spat on the ground. But he certainly knew. He stood up, walked towards the umpires who were behind the net, and said this, “We got nine on both teams now! It’ll be a waste of energy to keep practicing, so let’s begin now, shall we?”

“W-wait a moment!?”

I got around the back net, and stood between Octy and Kusakabe Masaya .

“Nishimura-san isn’t here yet, and we agreed that the match will start at 12!”

“Huh? Kusakabe, did I mention this to you?”

Kusakabe Masaya too narrowed his eyes behind the sunglasses, and shrugged.

“Never heard of it. All I know was that you called us to be here at 11.”

“This...but!”

“And also.” Octy continued with an indisputable fact, “I booked this place till 1pm. We can’t finish if we don’t hurry now.”

“Wha—”

I was speechless. Yondaime, who hurried, too remained rooted to the ground ‘we’ve been had’.

We left the important booking of the field to the enemy, and that was the grave mistake we made. It was all Octy’s plan. Kusakabe Masaya gave a look at

the four umpires, who from afar had such a conversation, “Guess we have to start now.”

Thus, even if they lost, they wouldn’t be gravely affected, and they could eliminate our best player, Nishimura-san. This was a double play on Octy’s part.

“Hey brats, hand over the batting order!” The home plate umpire shouted. Yondaime dragged me by the collar, and pulled me to the cars parked behind our third base bench.

“Nishimura isn’t picking up the phone.” Tomozou-san’s face paled as he said. Yeah, he’s in the hospital, and has to switch off his phone. This sly ploy had my legs wobbling.

“What do we do now?”

“No choice but for Yondaime to be the pitcher, Tomozou-san be the shortstop, Rocky as third baseman.”

“What about the batting order? Nishimura-san’s fifth.” “Major is ninth. Everyone to advance.”

“—Narumi!”

A girl’s voice came, and all the members huddled together looked over to the car.

The window was opened, and Alice revealed her face. Her dazzling black hair flowing down from the baseball cap.

“Go to the hospital and get the owner back!”

I stared at Alice wordlessly.

“What are you spacing out for? Go! If we can’t call him, we just have to go down. He’s going to the hospital with the yakuza having laid the trap for him, and there’s no way they will let him back. They’ll surely try to buy time! You’re the most useless fry on the team, so hurry off.”

“Eh, no-no, don’t we need nine players to play?”

“Ayaka!”

Alice suddenly shouted, and she, seated next to Meo on the back, jolted in

shock.

“You’re the ninth batter, the right fielder.”

“Eee? M-me?”

“Until the owner comes back. Hurry, Narumi! We can’t waste a single second!”

I, unable to react for a long time, remained rooted to the ground, and only after Yondaime smacked me in the back of my head did I hastily run for my bicycle. I kicked the stand, grabbed the handlebars, and pushed the bicycle up the grassy slope, running down the cycling track. Only as I ran against the oncoming wind did I slowly understand what Alice intended. This was really the only thing we could do. We couldn’t send Ayaka to the hospital when she doesn’t know anything, so I had to go.

And behind me, I could hear the loud voice of the umpire.

“Play!” With my back covered in sweat, I huffed and puffed through the hospital, the voices of the nurses trying to stop me left behind as I stormed into the ward room, and at this moment, the few men gathered around the middle bed to the right turned around.

It’s so damn hot out there, and these guys are all dressed in suits, revealing floral shirts and gold chains, and faint-colored sunglasses. Nishimura-san was seated on the other side of the bed, and once he spotted me, he too stood up in surprise. The frail, bearded bed got up to look at me.

“...Narumi-kun...why?”

Nishimura-san groaned. There were four of the yakuza, and unfortunately, it seemed these guys knew me, for they exchanged words. “Hey! This guy’s...” “Hinamura’s...” “The guy Nemoto-san spoke of?”

I went through the ward room filled with disinfectant scent, and hurried towards Nishimura-san. There were five other beds in the room, but the patients either had their curtains pulled up, or pretending not to notice. It’s no wonder, since we got four yakuza guys storming in for a visit.

“The match has started!”

Just saying these words left my parched throat stinging. Nishimura-san widened his eyes, and turned to the four yakuza guys.

“...Are you seriously deciding this with baseball?”

The old man on the bed groaned. He should be Nishimura-san’s dad, I guess? Looking at him, I guess he’s not really old, but just feeble due to his long term illnesses.”

“How stupid are you? That shop’s just a bother! Didn’t I tell you to let go of it already!?”

“Nishimura-san, look, even you dad says so.”

“Yeah. You’re just the owner. You dad’s the boss, right? Why talk further?”

“Hey brat, what are you doing here? Can’t you see we’re busy?”

One of the yakuza guys approached me. It’s a hospital, and they probably won’t beat me up or something, so I convinced myself as I darted by the yakuza, to the other side of the bed. There was a piece of paper on the table, and that’s probably the contract. Even the stamp’s ready.

“The match’s started. You have to go, Nishimura-san...”

“Hey, you.”

One guy grabbed my shoulder, his fingers sinking deep into my flesh, but that’s all. Nishimura-san looked over at me, and towards his dad on the bed.

“Dad, please! Just let me try. I want to continue running the shop!”

“So what happens if you lose? You’ll get chased out without earning anything. That’ll make it all for nothing, right?”

“Your dad’s right! Don’t do anything silly!”

“Dad!”

Nishimura-san placed his hands on the bed, shouting,

“Please, I don’t want to lose without competing, and that’s why I decided to settle this with baseball. I’m not good at anything other than baseball, and you know that, dad. If you see a nice pitch to bat at, aren’t you going to swing at it?”

"hey, this is the hospital! That'll trouble everyone else."

"Your dad will be disturbed by this too, right? Go back already."

"It's long decided. You're not a kid now. Face reality--"

The yakuza gang members swarmed together on Nishimura-san, but I did see what happened behind their arms.

The bearded, wrinkled face was suddenly full of life, his eyes widened. The frail, scaly arm reached for the side table.

--Dad!"

Nishimura-san groaned loudly, and right when his father ripped apart the contract. The yakuza members gathered their eyes upon the white piece of paper that was ripped apart, and the arms grabbing Nishimura-san and me lost strength.

I immediately grabbed Nishimura-san by the arm, barged into the yakuza standing next to me.

--Oof." "you!"

We darted past the beds, and went for the door.

"If you lose, I'll beat you up, you hear?"

We heard Nishimura-san's dad behind us as he shoved us onto the corridor. Four sets of footsteps immediately hurried off after us, and I kicked the door close, running off.

We went by the hospital, with the nurses and doctors shouting at us, and all I could feel was sweat oozing.

"This is bad. They're catching on to us." Nishimura-san grabbed me by the shoulder as he stopped. There weren't many cars parked at the large carpark, so I could see a red car near the entrance, and a few people smoking on the hood and the trunk. The yakuza was already there, and surely it was a big trap laid by Octy. My brains, nearly fried by the heat, started to thinking. If we're to wait for a taxi, we'll be discovered by the four running out of the ward room. In that case--

“I cycled here.”

Nishimura-san nodded, and immediately got over to the other side. The bicycle waiting for us at the park was scorched by the sun, the handlebars and seat nearly sticking onto my skin “I’ll ride, you sit at the back.”

Before sitting on the back, I glanced at the time on the phone. It’s almost noon, can we make it? how many innings? However, I didn’t have the time to contact the rest. With my arms wrapped around Nishimura-san’s waist, the accelerating breeze blew at my sticky, sweat skin.

The headwind came down the cycling track by the riverside, and finally brought us cheers and the sound of the bats. I could only sense Nishimura-san’s body heating up. The bicycle ferrying both of us went down the green, grassy slope, and we both hopped off, falling over. The brown skinned girl seated at the bench was the first to notice us, “Mr Assistant!” and she stood up, waving at us. However, I looked past Meo’s shoulders, towards Kusakabe Masaya , and was gasping for breath.

“...One run difference...?”

Nishimura-san muttered. Latter half of the eighth inning, our team on offense. It seemed to be a pitcher’s deadlock. There were zeroes everywhere.

2-3. We’re losing.

I looked around the field. Major was standing on first base, and Ayaka was holding the bat, shrivelled on deck. Before her was Hiro, who swung at a foul tip, and catching this ball with amazing reflexes was Octy, wearing his mask.

“Batter out!”

The umpire shouted.

“Umpire, we’re changing players. Nishimura will take over from Shinozaki.”

Alice shouted from the car window. We just arrived, and she noticed us?

“Nishimura, is it okay for you to pinch hit?” Min-san immediately went over to hand her cap to Nishimura-san, who caught his breath and nodded.

“...That guy has been the catcher the entire time?”

Nishimura-san bit his lips as he looked towards Octy.

“Since the first inning.” Min-san answered.

“Then...he’s holding back his arm. This one run...is a huge difference.”

I felt ringing at my ears. Nishimura-san’s voice wore off.

“So-sorry, I’ve been committing errors...”

Seeing Ayaka on the verge of tears, Nishimura-san patted her on the head, and took the bat. I checked the batting order against. Nishimura-san was moved aside because of their ploy, and we had to change the batting order 1. Min-san (Second Base) 2. Tomozou-san (Catcher) 3. Tetsu-senpai (Shortstop) 4. Rocky (Third Base) 5. Yondaime (Pitcher) 6. Pole (First Base) 7. Major (Left Field) 8. Hiro (Center Field) 9. Ayaka (Right Field)

The situation’s one man out, and a man on first base. Once Ayaka’s subbed out, we just need to get Major to advance, so that Min-san will start again. A sacrifice bunt might work too. That’s why Nishimura-san decided without hesitation to pitch hit.

“Huh, you made it?”

Octy removed his mask, grinning at us.

“Hey, we’re switching positions too. Don’t you dare think of stepping onto second base now.”

Saying that, Octy tossed the catcher mask to the man who had been pitching the entire time.

Looking at his practice pitches, we realized that Octy’s fastballs were terrifyingly sharp. Furthermore, they were often out of control, and the catcher dropped a few pitches despite there not having any batter in the box.

“That doesn’t look like a pitch from a forty year old...” Tetsu-senpai muttered.

Just keep your eyes peeled and hit, Min-san said as she ushered Nishimura-san into the batter box. That wasn’t the problem though. The terrifying fastballs left Nishimura-san and Min-san striking out.

“Is he looking down on us here?”

Yondaime sat next to me, grimacing,

“Those guys swung quickly when I pitched, and that’s why they only got 3. They probably wanted to make this game quick.”

I nodded. If Nishimura-san had wasted more time at the hospital, it would be over, and we wouldn’t catch up to this one run led. If he really did, Octy, who had been holding back, just had to fend him off. A one run lead was sufficient for them.

Octy was about to get off the mound, and my stare just happened to meet his. The sweaty face was neither sneering nor glaring away, just looking lethargic.

So I stepped into the fair zone, and called out to him.

“...Why?”

Octy stopped in his tracks, and turned towards me.

“Why? You could make such amazing pitches. You’re probably a lot better in the past.”

“What are you saying?”

“Alice investigated your past. About the baseball gambling.”

Octy showed a frown between his brows.

“You were fixing games that year, right? Not to lose on purpose, but to win deliberately by one. Bettors can include such details, so you did the same move over several matches, since the payout’s much higher. Most importantly, this wouldn’t leave any proof.”

“You brats are really annoying. You investigated such useless details? So what if you did?”

Octy spat on the pitcher mound, and turned back to frown at me. However, I continued to talk.

“That should be a lot harder than deliberately losing, yet you could manage this as a pitcher. Nemo-san, since you had the ability, why did you get involved

with the yakuza? There should be a more proper way of earning money, right? Also, there's definitely no way to find proof of you fixing matches. If you hadn't dropped out, pretended not to know anything about this, and continued to play baseball."

"Shut up, you damn brat." Octy's words cut me off like an axe, "Ability? What nonsense! There are monsters like me all over the Koshien! Those guys will get messed up by the real monsters in the pro league! Look at the salary of the top-tier players, and you can see it's a world filled with lots of monsters there, right?"

I gulped the sandy spit. Overwhelmed by Octy's vigor, I had to force myself not to step past the foul line.

"With that level of skill, someone of my level can only earn money by doing that, so I did. Nobody remembers the pitches I made, and everyone remembers me for being involved in some large gambling ring, because money's the most important! That's why I feel sick when I see you guys fooling around on the field. Any amateur who can't earn money can just enjoy themselves watching baseball at night!"

Octy turned around and returned to the first base bench. I, and even Nishimura-san standing next to me watched his back silently. I couldn't refute. What words could I say that could reach him? I'm just a detective's assistant, unable to do anything other than digging up and burying the words of the Dead. That man's pitches are still alive, preserved in that summer thirty years ago.

Nishimura-san might have something to say to Octy, since they both stood on the pitchers' mound before.

Top half of the ninth inning, and Nishimura-san easily got three outs with his terrifying pitching. His pitches were different from Octy's, not particularly fast, and not really breaking. However, he kept pitching at the inside corners with a bamboozle of breaking pitches, not giving the opponent any time to rest, and completely sealed off the opponent's offense.

However, I, seated on the bench, sensed that uneasiness.

It wasn't because of Nishimura-san, but from Yondaime, the shortstop. He wasn't moving really well, or to be honest, his catching seemed weird, maybe

because he was deliberately protecting his right arm and leg, and when throwing to first base, he was grimacing. Min-san too noticed what was going on. The pinch runner for the third batter tried to knock into Yondaime up front, and the ball popped out from his glove. Luckily, Min-san reacted fast enough to save the ball from rolling to the scenter, and threw towards first. After a terse moment, the umpire deemed the batter out, and the yakuza on the first base bench got up to lash out at the home plate umpire, who ignored this completely as he announced a change over.

Octy, kneeling on one knee in the deck, looked over at Nishimura-san for a moment, I didn't know what expressions they showed when they passed by each other, and I had no time to bother about this, for Yondaime knelt down at second base.

"You alright?"

I hurried over, put his arm over my shoulder, and stood up. "Sou-san!" Clumsy footsteps followed as they gathered to my sides. Pole and Rocky.

"I'm fine. Just some heatstroke."

Yondaime was clearly lying, and I carried him over to the third base bench. The door of the blue foreign car opened up, and Alice, in pajamas, rushed over, shouting, "Get that stubborn guy into the car! Ayaka, come here. Get him some ice packs."

"Shut up. I'll be alright."

"Your talent at being stubborn is really vexing. And you dare continue to pitch while saying you're alright."

We brought Yondaime onto the car, and found the wounds on his arms and legs bleeding. Even Ayaka, who was about to bandage him, was shocked as she covered her mouth with both hands. I shivered. Yeah...this guy was beaten up badly and concussed when he went to the hospital. He just got discharged recently. I forgot.

"Oi Gardening Kid, watch the match and forget about me. There's another three batters until my turn."

"You still have the time to care about the match!? How can you possibly bat

when your body's like this--"

"Shut up. Anyway, watch that bald's pitches, and don't lose sight of them."

"Narumi, Yondaime's right."

I was kicked out of the car. Though angry, I stood up. Watch Octy's pitches? So what if I go back to look? The second half of the ninth inning is our last chance to attack, and furthermore, there's no point for me going--

Suddenly, I thought of something, and checked the batting order again.

First up, the second batter Tomozou-san, who blocked the fastball coming right at his chest with the base of the bat, causing it to roll out, be picked up by the pitcher, and thrown out at first base. Following that, the batters were Tetsu-senpai at 3, and Rocky at 4.

Someone had to be on base so that the match wouldn't end. With that, the fifth batter Yondaime could step up. The problem's that Yondaime's injured, and couldn't stand in the batter box. In that case.

Tetsu-senpai used his good eye reaction as a boxer to seize the moment to hit, and managed to remain alive as he barely managed to hit a few foul balls. On the ninth pitch, the full powered fastball broke Tetsu-senpai's bat. Once that critical sound was heard, I raised my hands, and cupped my head. The ball flew back, into the catcher's glove. Octy, standing on the mound, removed his glove to wipe off the sweat on his forehead, and I, who didn't get to exercise, was already soaked in sweat. Two men out. We're cornered. One more out, and we lose. Our home field would be wrecked.

Rocky, standing in the batter box, turned around, and said to me,

"I'll make sure to get the bat to you, aniki."

I lowered my eyes. If Rocky really got on base, the next up would be the one replacing Yondaime, me. I didn't have the mettle to prepare myself for this, shoved onto the battlefield, and had to stand before that Octy. At that moment, I started praying, even though it's useless.

Time passed by just like that, and when I lifted my head, it was over.

So I missed that moment.

All I heard was a blunt sound of thick flesh being struck, “Dead ball!” And the umpire shouting.

I lifted my head, and found Rocky stumbling towards first base. Octy, standing on the pitcher’s mound, looked impatient, and tossed the rosin bag about like a bean bag.

Rocky got on base. This fact overwhelmed my consciousness.

He really took the brunt of the pitch with his entire body. Meo hopped about happily on the bench, Major and Hiro nodded away in unison, while Pole yelled. Looking back at me first was Min-san, followed by Tomozou-san; everyone’s eyes were gathered upon me.

No, wait. Am I really next? I don’t have athleticism, or explosiveness. I’m just a bench player, only able to watch. I never thought I would be in the batter box! My legs are still weak and unable to stand.

Behind me, the car door could be heard opening.

“Umpire, batter change!”

Our little manager called out from behind me.

I stood up, and turned around.

Maybe I was showing a hapless look, on the verge of tears. When my eyes met Alice’s, her face showed some despair, pity, and anger.

And at the next moment, I heard her say something unbelievable.

“I’ll bat.”

The long hair grazed by me. The petite figure in pajamas, knee socks, and a baseball cap stepped onto the scorching field with trembling footsteps, grabbed the bat, and went further away.

“—Alice!”

I recovered, and hurried over. The black hair fluttered as she turned around with a pale look, pointing the bat at me “What? Are you planning to stand in the batter box now? Given how fragile you are now, you’ll most likely end up with three strikes. Back down.”

“No, but, even you can’t do anything.”

“Nee-san!” “Alice, you’re not looking too good. Don’t force yourself.” “Get back in the car now.”

The little detective supported herself off the bat, and shouted at my teammates who went over to stop her,

“Don’t defy the manager’s orders!”

Amidst the flying dirt, Alice turned her back on us, and stumbled into the batter box. Even the home plate umpire and catcher were looking at us, “Is this really okay?” so they seemed to imply.

“What kind of a joke is this!?” Octy, standing on the pitcher’s mound, spoke up, his face devoid of a smile.

“This isn’t a joke. I’m a player-manager. Nemoto Kiichi. You’re a baseball player from Kansai, you should be very familiar with the first Mister Tigers, Fujio Fujimura. Now experience the terror of the words ‘I’ll pinch hit’.”

“Respects, nee-san!” Rocky shouted from first base.

“How bold you are. Let’s see if you can talk after a high inside pitch—”

“Ump! Start play again!”

The home plate umpire put on his mask unhappily, pointed at Octy, and said,



“Play!”

Octy narrowed his eyes, and a bullet fastball went right above home plate, landing a crisp sound in the catcher’s mitt. Alice’s black hair fluttered with the wind. I thought she would have passed out there and then.

But after hearing the decision by the home plate umpire, I understood her intentions.

“Ball!”

“What!?” “Didn’t it go in!?” “Where are you looking at, umpire?”

A few yakuza members, including the catcher, stood up furiously, but the home plate umpire remained unmoved.

“...That was right down the middle, right?” Tetsu-senpai muttered next to me. It’s true that if it was any other batter in the box, that would have been a strike.

Standard baseball rules 2, clause 73.

A strike zone refers to the area above the home plate, the top of the shoulder, the middle of the uniform waist, and above the knees.

In other words, the strike zone for Alice, who’s less than 130cm in height, the strike zone’s very low and narrow.

“Is she aiming for ball four? That’s testing her luck too much.” Nishimura-san blurted in disbelief, “But what happens after that? If we really amange to get onto first and second, we can’t turn this around.”

A blunt sound caused the dirt to fly and completely cover Alice, and she kept coughing. I forgot the match was still going on, and nearly rushed over to Alice, only to be pulled back by Tetsu-senpai. “Ball!” The umpire called again, but as the pitch was flying low, it bounced off the ground. The dust settled, and there was a dent on the dirt before home plate, terrifying me.

Alice, please, stand a little further away from home plate. Don’t swing! That pitch isn’t just going to break your bones.

But my prayers were practically crushed as Octy threw the third pitch, right at Alice’s flank, or so it seemed. All I felt was my organs being torn upon. Alice fell on her backside.

“Strike!”

Once the home plate umpire yelled his decision, I called for time, ran into the batter box, and lifted Alice. The shivering white fingers were grabbing onto my arm.

“...You’re just a batter yourself. Why call for time?”

“Enough already. You’re already feeling unwell outside, and the weather’s so hot.”

“Let go of me! This is a battlefield!”

An unbelievable strength shoved me out of the field. The home plate umpire indicated for the match to continue.

Shockingly, when Octy made the fourth pitch, Alice actually swung. The bat weakly whiffed at the air two balls above the pitch.

“Strike two!”

Alice’s body spun away as the umpire made the call, and she collapsed onto the ground again. She couldn’t control the force of the bat swinging forward. I already knew about it, but I was speechless at seeing how feeble she was. Why swing? So what if she swung? And then, I was terrified by what I thought. So what if she swung? She came to pinch hit in the latter half of the ninth inning, with two men out. If she couldn’t do anything, it’s all over.

The fifth pitch again formed a huge arc on the ground, bouncing in the catcher’s glove. This time, Alice hastily checked her swing.

Time seemed to have stopped at this moment. The slight breeze lifted some dirt, as Alice and the catcher looked towards the home plate umpire in unison. Our eyes too were probably gathered there. What’s the decision? Strike three? Does it end there?

The home plate umpire didn’t say anything, instead pointing at the first base umpire. A checked swing. It was impossible for the home plate umpire to see if the batter did swing, so it was for the base umpire to decide.

“Swing!”

The base umpire stretched his fist out, saying this. My eyes suddenly went

dark.

“Strike three!”

The home plate umpire responded with the same action, and I nearly collapsed to the ground.

It’s over, the game’s over. The sweat’s falling like a frozen waterfall, and from a corner of my eye, I saw Alice throw the bat onto the ground, remove the helmet, pat it on her chest twice, and pulled aside the long hair covering her face, “Where are you looking!?” She exclaimed as she walked towards first base.

“I didn’t swing! Take back what you said!”

The yakuza members were laughing away. The outfielders were preparing to return to the first base bench, and the catcher threw the ball aside, removing his mask, grinning as he wiped his sweat.

“Well, that was tiring.” “Good exercise there.” “Let’s go back and have some drinks.”

“You got to be joking!”

Alice stepped onto first base, and saw him shrugged. She was so livid, she threw her helmet onto the ground, and started point at the second base umpire, walking over.

“You’re standing right behind the pitcher. You can see, right? I didn’t swing at all—”

At that moment,

Octy, who was about to leave the mound, seemed to have noticed something. He turned towards second base, and then scanned the entire field. At that moment, I too noticed, and Nishimura-san next to me probably did so to.

Octy was probably looking for Rocky, who should be on first base.

Rocky was about to step onto third base, probably intending to return to our bench at third base, or not. From a corner of my eyes, I did see Rocky step on second base once. Octy’s forehead was popping veins as he hollered, “Get the ball to me! You idiots, we’re still in place, don’t leave your positions! Third—no,

second. Get the ball to second!"

Alice's paled as she ran. Given her leg strength, there was a devastating amount of distance between her and second base. Octy too kicked off the pitcher's mound as he hurried towards second base, and the catcher fumbled around, picked the ball up, and tossed it towards him Octy's massive body, the white ball, and Alice's little blue body joined together on second base.

The dust scattered. The long black hair resembled seaweed dried on the shore pathetically, scattered all over the field. Octy, twisting his ankle towards second base, reached his glove out to tap at Alice's head, and her slender hand was already grabbing onto a corner of the base.

"...Safe." The base umpire declared, and a deafening silence echoed through the field. Octy was holding the ball, stumbling to his feet as he returned to the mound. How many present actually knew what happened?

"...Isn't it a strikeout? Isn't the match over?"

Min-san stood behind me, asking. Nishimura-san shook his head, his eyes clearly effervescent with excitement.

"An uncaught third strike." I too couldn't contain my excitement as I exclaimed.

"Uncaught third strike...doesn't that mean the catcher didn't manage to catch the ball?"

"That's not it. That goes even when the ball bounces once off the ground. As long as the catcher doesn't catch the third strike, it's the same as the batter hitting the ball out, and becoming a baserunner."

But who would have thunk it? Two men out, an uncaught third strike, the baserunner walking up to first base by pretending to look for the first base umpire. Alice too had the time to pat the helmet on her chest, showing the sign that it's time to run. If it wasn't for Rocky being the one on first base, nobody would have noticed that was a sign. That idiot spent an entire week remembering these two actions, so while he wasn't sure what was going on, his body naturally responded to Alice's intentions.

Octy, returning to the pitcher's mound, clearly looked regretful as he kept

stomping on the mound. The heartless breeze got stronger, and my pulse got faster.

It was likely Alice had been aiming for this right from the start, and not a ball four walk.

If it's a ball four walk, the runners could only move to first and second. This was the only way to send both within scoring position.

Alice slowly climbed towards second base, and finally stood up, her face covered with dirt. When did this NEET detective ever dirtied herself like this in her life?

“Eh?”

Meo looked shocked and excited as she hopped out from the spectators stand, and ran onto second band. I glanced aside at Kusakabe Masaya who was behind the net, his sunglasses unable to disguise his heinous look. The home plate umpire too looked back at him, but he did not indicate anything; perhaps he agreed to let her participate.

A gaudy looking Alice returned to the bench, with everyone rushing forth to welcome her.

“As to be expected of you, nee-san!” Pole rushed over, nearly quashing Alice.

“Such a daring move...” Major too was dumbfounded. Min-san grabbed Alice, and shook her body.

However, Alice lifted her head, and turned back to look at the batter box.

“...It's not, not over yet.”

“Alright, get on the car first. Your face is as pale as a candle.”

Min-san said worriedly, but Alice pushed her aside on the chest, and stood up on her feeble legs.

Her eyes were staring right at me.

“...You understand now, right?”

I nodded towards her.

Two men out, men on second and third. Looking at the batting order, the

sixth batter Pole will be next, and the opponent might send him on base to have Major batting with the bases loaded. This is why I have to appear now, during this perfect chance when we won't be. If Octy's willing to settle this with us seriously, the opponent has to be me, the weakest.

So I took the bat from Pole, had Tetsu-senpai put the helmet on me, and walked to the batter box. Alice informed of a change in batter, and pushed me in the back.

"You've given us the turnaround here. Don't you dare think that can work a second time."

Octy, on the pitcher's mound, frowned and glared at me.

"This will end in three swings."

Great, so I thought as I gripped the bat. If he's willing to settle this with me, I got something to give right back to him, though I didn't know if that would work.

Until I swung at the incoming white ball head on, I wouldn't be able to convey my words towards him. This was the one thing I was certain of.

So I swung on the first pitch. The impact was so strong, the base of the bat could have exploded, and it reached through my arms, shoulders, and teeth. The ball I had grazed my face, hitting the net, and giving off a sound.

Octy frowned. It appeared he wasn't too happy about that fastball, but never expected me to seize the timing and swing the bat.

"Ain't your specialty about talking and scaring people?"

"...Yeah. Getting up to work my body isn't that anyway."

I answered as I stared at Octy. Suddenly, I recalled the words Alice often said about me, "The only thing good about you is your eyesight." How long can I hang on? No, I have to. The second pitch was a fastball to the inner corner. I instinctively lowered my shoulder, and the pitch was half a ball away from the zone. The third pitch swung in from the outside corner, and I swung. A simple fastball, and my bat whiffed the air 5cm before the ball.

I called for time, wiped at the sweat that was trickling down the helmet. The

ringing in my ears got worse, and I couldn't hear anything. Looking far behind Octy, Meo's brown silhouette seemed blurry. To the extreme left of my eyes was Rocky's massive body, and he was far from third base, preparing to run forward.

I couldn't let it end here.

"Just give up and admit defeat already. You're seriously scrappy."

Octy said as he flattened the mound with his feet.

"What's with that look? Still think you can change anything? What's with the ridiculous confidence of yours when you're all talk? Are you telling me it's all from that stupid baseball game?"

"Yeah. It might be some stupid baseball game to you, Nemo-san."

The fourth pitch, a low fastball, interrupted me. The bat grazed the white ball. Once I saw the catcher's glove reach for the deflected ball, my heart froze. However, the ball popped out from the catcher's glove, and rolled out of the net. My eyes slowly got used to the fastball, and I could see it. Octy's starting to get in his groove too, his control and precision improving. Following that were two pitches just out of the zone that were aimed to get the batter to swing, but I managed to hang on with foul balls. My finger were numb, and I practically lost all feeling. I could see the ball, but I could do nothing about the fastballs that kept coming at the same high school. Octy began to pitch in the eighth inning, and still had some gas in the tank.

Thus, I tried to set a trap. Before he pitched to try and get me to reach, I would feint a bunt before pulling it back at the last moment. Two balls. Octy frowned, and he glanced aside at Rocky on third base. Right, please focus your attention on the runners. Two men out, but I could try to bunt or get them to steal home.

The eighth pitch was a fastball high and in, and yet I barely managed to hit it. The bat was knocked aside, and I fell back, but I stared at the ball rolling into foul territory, and stopped myself from falling over. I still had strength to hang on. Octy's pitching style had changed. Before he pitched, he would check his grip in his glove.

The next pitch was a fastball way inside, but I swung. I couldn't let it become a full count, lest Octy would simply send me on base. I had to keep taunting him, and stoke the flames of passion that remained hidden over the last thirty years.

And so, the sign came. While Octy got ready to pitch, he did something for the first time in the entire match. He glanced at Meo, who was on second base.

That was the only change however. Octy raised the ball above his head, and swung his arm down in the same motion, and that caused my confidence to be rattled. Any form of baseball that doesn't earn money is trash; the words Octy once said echoed in my mind. However, we were just so mesmerized by this trash, and kept investing our time and money into it. It's just a virtual reality baseball field created through a computer program, yet we were really having a showdown over this. That place belongs to us, and many who are like us, who are willing to embrace the passion of us trash. Were you not the same back then? Right? I firmly believe that the ball you pitched was once in the worthless garbage, that the wonderful part that can't be turned into money once reached a certain person, and remains till now.

With a calm feeling, I quietly waited for that ball to appear.

I remembered seeing this line in a certain book, that a straight ball is a type of breaking ball.

The pitch will sink due to gravity, which naturally would happen. A straight fastball that uses a lot of backspin to remain straight is not a natural pitch. A forkball was a natural pitch, for it kills off all spin and drops straight down. That was what was written in the book.

Thus, all I had to do was to wait, watch where the ball was going, and swing.

A numbing sweetness reached my hands, and it was a long, long while until I heard a sound. Following that was a feeling of my bones shaking. A tremendous cheer struck the back of my neck. I saw a coffee-colored silhouette pass by, and to my distant left, there was a massive black silhouette there. I followed through, tossed my bat aside, and ran, feeling as though I was stepping upon the clouds.

I did not notice where the ball flew. By the time I realized it, the first base in the dirt flew by my feet. My tense emotions finally snapped, and my legs

wobbled as I nearly fell face first into the dirt. I barely supported myself off the ground with both hands, and turned around to grab first base. My brain was aching due to oxygen deprivation, and I finally had a chance to look up at the place I was at just seconds ago.

Meo's petite body dashed past home plate, and into the clutches of Rocky who was waiting there. The ball thrown back in from the outfield rolled to the pitcher's mound.

Goodbye, game. We won. Sweat sputtered from the pores all over my body, even through my ears and eyes. I guess it's my tears and snot following out. I leapt to the ground, grabbed first base, and from afar, watched my teammates at home plate. The scoring runner Meo was petted and ruffled by everyone else welcoming her home.

Erm...was I forgotten? Did everyone ignore me because they're too excited? Winning felt so surreal to me, and even after the umpire had determined the ball game over, and the plate umpires returned behind the net, nobody noticed me. How cruel. I was the batter who did that clutch hit.

So, the first to pull me up, or rather, grab me by the collar and dragged me up, was Octy.

I did not dare to look at him, and I could not run away. "Ah, er, erm." After stammering for a long while, I could only lower my head. I had no guts to determine the look Octy was giving me.

"Mr Assistant!" "Fujishima-kun!"

Meo and Ayaka seemed to have remembered me, and were shouting with excitement, about to run towards me. Pole and Rocky were about to follow suit, but saw Octy standing next to me. Was he giving such a scary look? I probably would never lift my head again.

But this time, I did crush his confidence.

Thus, I could only accept this outcome. I could not keep my head low and not look at him the entire time.

I lifted my head, and spotted a sweaty, reddened octopus face, his eyes

glittering with remorse.

Octy glared at me, as though wanting to crush me into paste with his glare.

“You were waiting for the forkball the entire time? How did you know? Even the moment I would throw it too?”

“...Yes. I knew.”

I answered, and my throat was in great path. It felt as though hot sand was poured into my throat.

“But I had no actual proof. All I knew is that you would settle for the forkball, and know that you have a habit of glancing towards second base if there’s a runner behind you, to prevent the ball path from being read.”

Octy’s eyes were wide, his fingers sinking deeper into my shoulders.

“Impossible. It’s been thirty years since I participated in an official match, and there was no game log. It knows my pitching habits too? How’s that possible!? How do you know?

“Of course there was a game log.”

I shook off Octy’s hand, and stared at him right in the eyes.

“The record is in the baseball game you hated.”

Octy’s half-opened mouth was shaking. Perhaps he really didn’t want to believe this. But I did find the record in the game. Entering the name Nemoto Kiichi in ‘PWLB’ would result in a player profile, and that was our intel.

“Don’t be silly.” Octy spat hoarsely. “How can the game...possibly have data on me? I just pitched a few times in the koshien...”

“That game has a public database. Do you know that everyone can add new data into the database? In other words, someone added a ‘pitcher Nemoto Kiichi’ into the database.”

I shut up, and watched Octy’s face clear like the dispersing clouds.

“That’s probably someone who remembers you, Nemo-san, and probably saw you pitch before. You say that nobody remembers, that everyone will be forgotten, but it’s all a lie, right? There’s no way such an amazing blazing fastball. You haven’t forgotten about baseball yourself, have you? Even now, you still have such skill. So...”

--As long as you don’t forget, the god of baseball will never forget the summer you pitched.

My final words landed upon the sweat-filled dirt, vanishing.

Octy and Nishimura-san brushed by each other at the mound. The winning and losing pitchers interacted in a manner much simpler than a self-conceited detective assistant, yet more convincing.

Nishimura-san merely picked up his cap, and bowed deeply towards Octy.

And Octy picked up the winning ball that just so happened to be at his feet, and tossed it back.

Nothing else. Not a single word.

After the battle, I guess this isn’t a bad way to end this. Right, it’s like how the online play of ‘PWLB’ ends. Both sides will only go ‘Nice Game’, or sometimes exchange uniform pictures. That’s all. As for what’s different between the virtual baseball written in a program and the real baseball field we stood, maybe it’s just the blazing heat of battle and the cooling breeze, I guess? Basking in the comforting breeze is the privilege only a sportsman can have.

Thus, I wanted to continue enjoying this for a moment.

*

A week later, the office was moved into the fourth floor of ‘Game Nishimura’.

After school, I went to the shop alone. The noisy game sounds was mixed with the sound of drills and hammers. Construction work somewhere?

“Those guys paid to have stairs at the back.”

I entered the back room, and Nishimura-san informed me of this.

“Nemoto-san said, I won’t want to see a bunch of brats whenever I enter and leave the office.”

But, I stood at the entrance of the back room, observing the shop on the first floor, and thought of something. Was Octy trying not to scare the brats who dropped by to play ‘PWLB’. If the yakuza caused a decline in customers, and caused ‘Game Nishimura’ to close down, that will violate the agreement ‘for the shop to continue running’.

I tried to ask Nishimura-san, “Maybe.” So he answered.

“But really...thank you. Thanks to everyone.”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Please don’t thank us.”

I hurriedly got up from my chair.

“We just did what we wanted, and Major was the one who stoked the flames...”

“It’s fine! I did make the request. I’ll definitely pay.”

“Major paid Yondaime, Min-san and Tomozou-san. He was the one who called them.”

“He paid for me first? I’m sorry....I have to pay for the chassis this week, so I’m a little tight on cash this week. But please tell Major to bill me...”

“We discussed this, and we hope that you won’t accept anything in cash...”

“...Do I have to pay in goods? What? In that case, game medals?”

“Erm, actually, we hope for you to be our baseball coach.”

Nishimura-san widened his eyes.

“I think us NEETs with nothing to do got addicted to baseball...other than Rocky and Pole, everyone in the Hirasaka-gumi wanted to play...”

But it’ll cool off soon, I guess. Nishimura-san showed various expressions on his face. I guess he’s happy, or at least, I could tell. His hand on his thigh was holding a non-existing baseball, affirming its presence.

“You can’t possibly find a team to play against now, right? There’s 18 if we count the Hirasaka-gumi guys, but only a few can be pitchers and catchers...”

“Don’t they have a lot of equipment at the batting center next door?”

Once Nishimura-san mentioned this, I tilted my head in confusion.

“Now that you mention it, they’re finally moving?”

“No, seems like they’re doing refurbishing. A real estate company involved with the yakuza bought it.”

“HuH?”

“There has been some weird rumors recently. A guy looking like an octopus has been batting there alone in the middle of the night. It’s just a weird rumor though.”

After thinking for a moment, I finally understood what Nishimura-san meant, and I looked up at the ceiling, shaking my head and hands.

“No no no no no, spare me already! I want to play against normal people.”

Nishimura-san laughed.

“But Narumi-kun, your team isn’t normal either. That’s hypocritical.”

It’s true, I guess...Min-san and Tomozou-san are proper, working adults, and since they always have to work, they can’t play baseball from time to time. So this team has to be formed with NEETs.

“But, I understand. I’m willing to be coach. Ah, yes. While real-life baseball is fun, do come to our shop to play ‘PWLB’, okay? I hear there’s a new edition coming out next year.

I nodded, shook hands with Nishimura-san, and left ‘Game Nishimura’.

“...Because of this, we don’t have any earnings, and there’s no payment to you, Alice.”

I showed up at the office, and cautiously informed Alice of this. Naturally, the detective’s rage was not abated in the slightest.

“How naïve. This is absolutely unforgivable! I did this much, and I don’t have a reward?”

The ice bag on Alice's forehead slipped off. She had been lying on the bed ever since the match effort. It seemed her efforts on the field had overburdened her body, whether it was standing in the batter box, or sliding head first into base.

"I acted as manager, deputed as a hitter, saved a shop, and I got no reward! Ants and cockroaches have more economical sense than you people."

"Well, you really enjoyed yourself, so what's the problem...also Major paid off those not in the agency. You can deduct my pay for your reward, Alice."

I always wanted to say this, but this fellow here's unexpectedly petty about finances.

"The problem isn't about deducting from your pay! In a capitalist society, the weightage between pros and cons is very important"

"So I said that Nishimura-san is willing to be our coach. Don't you like to play baseball too? I won't ask you to go out there and pinch hit again...but you can be coach too."

"I am not going to involve myself with such a barbaric sport. I made an exception to help because you accepted this job! Don't think too much into this."

Alice turned her head aside, and looked towards the screen by the bed.

"Anyway, the reward is still most important. Since you say you want me to deduct yourself salary, don't regret this. Katsuya Nomura's annual salary as player-manager was 5 hundred million yen, and my contributions are the same as his, so if I count my actual labor time of one and a half hours..."

Thus, Alice started deducting my salary in a ridiculously terrifying manner I did not know of. Nothing good would come of this if I stayed around, so I hurriedly gathered all the empty Dr. Pepper cans, and slipped out of the office.

However, Alice did personally stand on the field, basked in the breeze, and engraved her blood and sweat on the white ball. She definitely would not forget.

The proof of it was a baseball cap on one of the teddy bears.

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After a while, there was a rumor regarding ‘PWLB’ on the internet. There was an amazing team that kept winning on the internet, and even scaled the national rankings. However, the player names were all ordinary. Strangely, this strong player’s identity remained unknown, and nobody could figure out which game center he was at. The common consensus was that he was a rich guy with a large console in his house, or that he hacked directly into the main console at the game company.

The name of this team was ‘Hanamaru NEETTeens’.

And the uniform logo was a cute teddy bear.

Afterword

During the 2004 offseason, the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes sold management rights to Orix, ending its 55 year history. The last manager happened to be Nashida Masataka. For both the Buffaloes and coach Nashida, the team ended its history regrettably without being able to conquer Japan.

Five years later, winter 2009. Coach Nashida led the Nippon Ham Fighters against the visiting Yomiuri Giants, only to be defeated, and unable to attain their dream. A month later, I visited the Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto for vacation. I saw the famous senbon tori, and there were thousands more inside the shrine, each of them carved with the name of the person praying, and the date. I just happened to find one with the words written,

“Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes, Nashida Masataka.”

That offertory was dated October 2006, two years after his final match.

After returning to Kyoto, I began drafting a short story close to the deadline. It was different from the draft I had initially submitted to the editor, so I ended up writing another story from scratch. I had to write a story about baseball. In that case, I had to put it at the last chapter of the short story anthology. So I thought.

It was my first time submitting a short story on the magazine, to be compiled in an anthology, and somehow, the earliest work was written three years ago. Looking back, I found that Alice and Narumi are greatly different from the present. Despite this, I tried to minimize the edits, and fixed certain plot points that did not flow well. In this story, it had been a year since Narumi started getting involved, and many things around him had changed greatly. Changed, but never vanishing. This was everything I believed in as I wrote, and I believe the future shall be the same.

The Kintetsu Buffaloes no longer exist. However, its life takes shape in a

different form, breathing through many teams, the hearts of the fans, and even in my novel.

If I could end off with such a touching episode, I suppose the editor will forgive me for not only changing the entire plot, but also for submitting it late?

This volume's sold along with the drama CD at the same time, and I am glad to participate in the writing of the audio drama. The manga by Tiv-san will also begin serialization in the June edition of 'Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh'. Also, to the editor Yuasa-sama, illustrator Kishida Mel-san, and also to everyone who bought this work, I will like to really express my thanks.

February 2010, Hikaru Sugii

Notes

1. ↑ The pronunciation of very weak in Japanese is dasai
2. ↑ Japanese video rental company
3. ↑ the currency used in Kaiji
4. ↑ Twins, artistes